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CHAPTER I

It was Harvest Festival at St. Peter's, Bracebridge, next day, and by four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, when the choir assembled to practise the hymns and chants for the service, the decorations were complete, and, so thought Mrs. Ramsden, who had in the main been responsible for them, very tasteful. She might have added, without deviation from the truth, had she been so disposed, that they were also somewhat smellful. Wreaths of corn and barley decked lectern and pulpit, and, mixed with ivy and laurel to give body, climbed up the row of pillars between the nave of the church and the aisle, while the choir seats in front of the organ were a positive bower of farinaceous vegetables. But other vegetables than the farinaceous had been used to deck the church, and it was they which, though equally tasteful, promised to challenge another sense. All up the sides of the chancel steps, for instance, were rows of discouraged cauliflowers and cabbages, while in the windows, mixed with the corn and barley, were apples, and melons, and pears, and in the background great lumpy swedes and pumpkins. Already the atmosphere was what might be described as "a little faint"; by the next day it was likely to be much fainter. In other respects the church was one of those that had been inspired by the devotional faith of the middle of the nineteenth century, with round limestone pillars of that particular epoch supporting pointed arches, with pitch-pine pews, and blue and red encaustic tiles, with windows in which violent and impure colours predominated, showing a green-robed Jonah being fitted with the precision of a cork into the mouth of a mild mauve whale, and, as a companion maritime scene, St. Peter walking in curious jewelled slippers over a purple sea. Elsewhere Joseph was complacently recounting his dream to his irritated family, and was subsequently being lowered into a spacious brown well, from which escape seemed not very difficult. Fat little heads, as of antique children, peeping out between pink wings, filled the tracery of the upper part of the windows, and indi-

cated angels. The organ had pale-green pipes, with an ecclesiastical design of otherwise unknown foliage stencilled on them, and contained a Vox Humana of peculiarly bleating tone, which sounded like a sheep that had gone very much astray.

The choir had already gathered, and Mrs. Ramsden was busy distributing music. Morning Service was to be of the ordinary type, without unusual feature, and the special choral effort, which included an anthem, "The valleys also shall stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing," by that amazing musician, T. Ferris, and a *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* by E. Blinkthorn, was to take place in the evening. It was to devote an hour's special practice to these that the choir had assembled.

"We are all here, I think," said Mrs. Ramsden. "We will begin with the anthem, 'The valleys also.' Trebles, please. One, two, three, four."

Miss Armitage emitted a faint scream.

"Organ, please," said Mrs. Ramsden.

Eleanor Ramsden, her stepdaughter, who had not been attending, put down a pedal-note which made Jonah quiver in his mauve whale, and played the grand and satisfying chord of C Major. Half-a-dozen small boys, who would appear in surplices next day, and were of the regular choir, supplemented the efforts of Miss Armitage and other ladies of the auxiliary choir, and gave out a phrase that encouraged the listener to hope that a fugue was to follow. But that was not T. Ferris's way. The altos joined in after two bars, the tenor after two more, and the basses at a similar interval, but they did not repeat the subject. They just sang some simple harmonies. Then the trebles sang, "The valleys, the valleys," and the basses replied, "Laugh and sing, laugh and sing." But this was not all. There was an alto lead next in quavers, "So thick with corn, so thick with corn," which gave the trebles an opportunity (of which they took advantage) to assert that the valleys were still there, and the tenors in major thirds to the basses endorsed the fact that they laughed and sang. A simple sequence of harmonies (T. Ferris was nothing, if not simple) brought everybody into the dominant, and they started off again in the pleasant key of G Major. Then for no apparent reason the valleys began to laugh, so to speak, on the other side of their mouths. From G Major (again simply) they took to E Minor, and laughed and sang in a subdued and staccato manner to the Vox Humana. A modulation in the organ cheered them up and led them to

their original key again, and with "Mixture" on the organ and a scale passage, broken when convenient to T. Ferris, from the basses, the anthem ended in a burst of bucolic merriment.

Alice Ramsden, half-sister to the organist, and whole daughter to the conductor, was sitting at the end of the organ-bench, turning over when necessary, and manipulating stops when Eleanor had her hands occupied.

"You vamped a good deal, didn't you, Nellie?" she asked, in a church whisper.

"Yes, of course. Did you ever hear such sickening stuff?" said Eleanor.

"'We plough the fields and scatter,'" said Mrs. Ramsden.

They did so, but at the end of the first verse Mrs. Ramsden beat her hymn-book with the rolled-up copy of T. Ferris's anthem.

"The organ, I think, might use a little more expression," she said. "For instance, we will take 'But it is fed and watered' very *piano*, and the Vox Humana would produce a good effect. We will take the last four lines of the verse in unison, and if the organ could give us some fresh harmonies—— Organ, please."

The organ gave them some fresh and Futurist chords. Unfortunately, several of the tenors and basses forgot that the piece was to be sung in unison, and their part-singing against Eleanor's most original harmonies produced an extremely weird and curious effect, which sounded like a realistic and modern rendering of a rough Channel crossing. Again Mrs. Ramsden beat on her hymn-book.

"In unison, please," she said. "And the organ a shade less secular."

Eleanor sighed. The organist had been suddenly stricken with influenza, and she had been press-ganged into his place when she was in the middle of a most entrancing and surreptitious reading of "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." How the work in question had got into the Vicarage at all she did not know; all she knew, after a single glance at it, was that she wanted nothing so much as to read it, and that it must be read surreptitiously. So she had taken it into the orchard under cover of the Parish Magazine, and had got to the middle of the second act when her stepmother came out and informed her of the indisposition of Mr. Courtney. Choir-practice was imminent, and now by her side there lay the Parish Magazine with the dubious play lurking in the middle

of it. Straight from the orchard she had come into the church. The second verse followed. In the middle of it Alice suddenly saw the Parish Magazine bloated with some insertion.

"What have you got there, Nellie?" she asked, her voice covered by the resounding choir and the Open Diapasons.

"A play I found in father's library. Don't tell mother," said Eleanor, speaking the syllables in time to the tune. "Pull out everything, Alice!"

Alice pulled out everything.

"Something mother wouldn't like?" she asked.

"I expect not. And I don't like this," said Eleanor. "What did that ass want to get influenza for?"

"I don't suppose he wanted it. . . . It just came."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Ramsden. "And the Service. Yes, Blinkthorn in E Flat. 'My soul doth magnify.' Altos, please."

Blinkthorn was straightforward. He gave no fugal promises which he failed to perform, like T. Ferris. He had an obvious tune, and when that obvious tune was done he had another obvious tune. It is true that in the *Gloria* he tried to put two of these obvious tunes together, but soon saw that he was hopelessly incapable of accomplishing that hazardous feat, and, leaving one to take care of itself, clung staunchly to the other, and reinforced it with something very uncommon and chromatic on the pedals. Then there was a dead pause, and Mrs. Ramsden said, "One, two," and then everybody else sang, "Amen."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Ramsden, with a little appreciative gasp. "It is glorious, is it not? Mr. Blinkthorn was my uncle on the mother's side, and I remember him, when quite a little girl, composing that noble *Magnificat*. When he played it over first we thought it was at least Handel. But it was dear Uncle Evelyn. Thank you. Copies, please."

The sheaves of Uncle Evelyn were brought to his niece, and she put them in the music-cupboard by the organ. The door of it stuck a little, and the wrench with which she opened it caused a melon to roll from its place, and dash itself on to the floor. But as it was not quite ripe, no harm was done. Eleanor, meantime, had concealed the Parish Magazine and that which it contained by the simple expedient of sitting upon it, and, having locked up Uncle Evelyn's works, her stepmother spoke to her in her earnest voice.

"Thank you, Eleanor," she said. "I am sure you will be

able to manage it perfectly to-morrow, for I hear that Mr. Courtney has been sent to bed, and there is no chance of his playing to-morrow. But I am convinced you will do the best you can. Do you think, dear, if you remained behind and went through the anthem four or five times more, it would make you feel surer? Of course, Alice will help you with the stops to-morrow. And voluntaries? What will you give us for voluntaries? They need so much practice, do they not? Some easy bit of Mendelssohn, do you think? There are one or two of the 'Liede ohne Worte' of very devotional tone. I would stop and help you if I could, but I have the Mothers' Meeting at six, and it is close on that now."

Mrs. Ramsden asked these various questions, not as if they required an answer, but as statements to the effect that Eleanor would stop and play the anthem four or five times more through, and practise some of the graver "Songs without Words."

"And, my dear, if you could get a little more expression into it," ventured Mrs. Ramsden. "Of course, we do not expect you to have the touch of Mr. Courtney, but I am sure you will find an hour's practice very helpful. Thank you."

So Eleanor and a small shiny-faced boy at the bellows were left in possession of the church, in states of about equal indignation at the hardness of their lots, for the blower wanted to go to play cricket, the player to read the surreptitious insertion in the Parish Magazine. Instead of which—and Eleanor reopened the weariful T. Ferris.

To say that Eleanor hated her life in this semi-urban parish of Bracebridge would be an overstatement of the case, because it belongs of divine right to the heart of a woman to spread tendrils of close affection round so much of that which forms her environment, whatever that environment may be. However uncongenial it may be as a whole, she will always wreathe little nooks and angles of it with her love, decking them, making them part of herself, and more especially does she do this while she is still young, and not yet arrived at the blossoming of her womanhood, when the heart is poured out on husband and children. Till then it leaks out in myriad tiny fountains, so that, wherever she is placed, she waters and refreshes her surroundings, making them take on as their own the grace with which she adorns them. It is not so with the ruder gender. A boy in general discontent with his portion and lot will, with masculine impatience, lump the whole together, and be glad to be rid of it; while the girl, in similar

circumstances will, so to speak, "save" a great deal out of what in the whole was tiresome, and both at the time and afterwards be tender over queer little angles and corners in a life that on the whole is most uncongenial to her. Certainly it was so with Eleanor Ramsden, of the uncertain profile and eighteen years. It would be hard to fashion for this unfortunate young woman a life of which the general conditions were less naturally congenial, but to say that she hated her life here would be to leave out of account the hundred little crannies and caves in which her soul made a garden for itself. These little infinitesimal gardens, it is true, were ringed about by sandy places, which often seemed illimitable, but her general unsuitableness to her surroundings was sensibly qualified by them.

But T. Ferris and his works, it must be confessed, partook more of the nature of the illimitable sand, and when the church emptied of the footsteps resonant on the encaustic tiles, it was with a very strong sense of impatience that she began a further study of the anthem. The sordidness, moreover, of such a study was accentuated by the fact that she could easily have composed without trouble an anthem quite as good as his. It needed only, as she thought to herself, a knowledge of the key of C, and a more than blissful ignorance of what could be done with it. She herself, all undeveloped as she was, was artistic to the end of her finger-tips, and perhaps more particularly there. As far as her life had manifested herself in the few years when they had worked in company together, it would have been altogether premature to prophesy for her the possession of anything like genius, because an essential part of genius is not so much the capacity for taking pains as the capacity for being educated. It has, even as she had, fine perception and sensibility, which by instinct, so it seems, sort the gold from the dross, but there is no knowing, while yet the nature is immature, whether it is capable of so being bred and mined that it will itself produce the precious metal. Exquisite sensibility is not enough; sensibility by itself never produces more than the pale flower, perfect though it may be, of criticism. It was a frowning critic, at any rate, that investigated the anthem. She was a little short-sighted, and her dark-grey eyes had that slightly lost, slightly unfocussed look that is characteristic of those who find it difficult to see very distinctly. Close over them ran a very narrow line of dark eyebrow, and above a low forehead shone the only beauty that had as yet definitely

taken up its abode with her. Hair, abundant and silky, of no vague straw-colour, kindly but erroneously called golden, but of the true reddish-tinged metal, crowned her in shining plenty. Her face was small, and of the creamy whiteness that so often goes with golden hair, her nose, childlike still, and indeterminate in shape, ruthlessly labelled (with reason) by its owner as of the genus "snub," and her mouth large and full-lipped. What the whole face would be like in another couple of years was still a matter for doubt, and perhaps her stepmother, who almost always took the straightforward and sensible view, was straightforward and sensible here when she said that "she was afraid that Eleanor was growing up very plain." The use of the word "afraid" only was deviation from her general straightforwardness, for she regarded good looks as a definite snare of the devil. It was, therefore, fortunate that she was not herself cursed in this regard. But by one of those amiable little inconsistencies which redeem certain human natures from the tragic picture that they would otherwise present, and lift them to the more sunlit levels of comedy, she often saw with satisfaction that her own daughter Alice, who had just now helped her elder half-sister to pull out stops, was growing up very pretty. But then Alice had a sweet expression, which clearly was a counter-claim against the possible author of her good looks.

Eleanor studied the laughing and singing of the valleys with care and contempt down to the very end of the scale passages, which she dutifully played on the pedals, continuing in honest dumb-show through a sudden failure of wind on the part of the organ and the mournful hooting of half-fed pipes as Tommie Lake, the defrauded cricketer at the bellows, invigorated its lungs again with rapid staccato strokes. Then, in mixture of kindliness for his probable fatigue and of desire for the hidden treasure in the Parish Magazine, she gave him pause, and went on with the second act of the entrancing play. She did not quite understand it all. It was clear, however, that Aubrey was making an unsuitable marriage, and his friends did not like it. But if a woman was engaged to a man, and was going to marry him next day, why on earth should she not come round and see him in the evening? And it was nice of her to give him all the letters that other people had written to her. Again, why did Mrs. Costelyon matter to anybody? Perhaps, however, she was tremendously attractive, and Mrs. Tanqueray wanted to know her very much. Anyhow, there seemed to be some

sort of mystery about Mrs. Tanqueray, which no doubt would be explained in the last act. At present, since Tommie Lake had had a rest, it was better to put Mrs. Tanqueray back in the Parish Magazine, and go through Mr. Blinkthorn's Service again. Her stepmother, she remembered, had said that when he gave them the première of the *Magnificat*, they had all thought it was Handel at least. To Eleanor's taste, modern for no reason except that it was modern, 'Handel at least' expressed a state of opinion that Mrs. Ramsden had not contemplated. To Eleanor, it seemed that Mr. Blinkthorn's *Magnificat* was "at least Handel," if not worse.

Yet the very sound of the organ, now that it was not obscured and overscored by voices that did not know what singing was, suggested all sorts of dreams. If you firmly put in certain stops evoked by treading on the foot-pedal, which brought out "Mixture," and banished the Vox Humana, and a terrible batlike note that "Diocton" made, it was possible to make sounds so sweet that it did not much matter what they said. The tone of certain stops—a "Gamba" in particular—was, unlike the "Vox Humana," like a human voice. There might be, almost must be, somewhere up there behind the stencilled pipes a melodious throat in mysterious utterance, and she played a short extemporized phrase on it, accompanying it with a few quiet chords on the Stopped Diapason. Somehow—somehow it was like an assertion of some truth against disagreeing opinion. It said its message; it seemed careless whether the tone of the others was against it or for it. They murmured and grumbled, but the confident voice outspoke them. And then she came back from the vague dreamland, and found that it was only Uncle Evelyn beginning to "put down the mighty." This would not do at all. There had to be more "expression," and she tumbled the mighty down in the famous chromatic passage from the pedals. There! there was expression!

Eleanor suddenly threw back her head and laughed, and, holding on the last chord of the final "Amen," she pulled out every stop in the organ, coupled the pedals on to the great, and the great on to the swell. She opened the swell-box. And then, with full organ, she played "La Donna e Mobile" right through.

"And that's all, Tommie," she called to the perspiring bellows-boy.

It was all, but it was quite enough, for the Mothers' Meeting, presided over by Mrs. Ramsden, was that day convened in the

vestry, owing to other occupation of the Parish Room. It had a door of its own from the churchyard, so that the members did not need to pass through the church, and the inspiriting strains of "La Donna" drowned for the moment Mrs. Ramsden's voice. She had not mentioned to Eleanor that the Mothers' Meeting would be held there, because there was no reason to do so; at the same time, she knew that she would be able to hear (without listening) whether Eleanor practised in a diligent and reverent manner. Already the long pause after the anthem, when her stepdaughter was devouring the second act of her play, had roused her curiosity and now, as Eleanor passed down the church, eager to seek the refuge of the orchard again, the vestry-door was suddenly opened, and Mrs. Ramsden stood before her.

"What was that which you played last, Eleanor?" she asked, in a tone of strict impartiality.

Eleanor's face fell; all the potential brightness of it faded.

"A song by Verdi," she said.

"I have heard it on barrel-organs," said Mrs. Ramsden. "I have not before heard it in church. I shall be compelled to speak to your father about this."

And the vestry-door closed again.

Figuratively speaking, Eleanor's mind shrugged its shoulders She hated vexing her father, but poor Daddy, she thought, ought to have got accustomed to it, and anything that was of the nature of friction between his wife and daughter always vexed him. As for the crime itself, the playing of Verdi on the village organ, Eleanor knew quite well what his real attitude would be. He would really be thinking to himself, "Well, my dear, it is more suitable to the barrel-organ or the theatre, is it not?" and Eleanor would agree with him. But when Mrs. Ramsden told him he would say to Eleanor: "Nellie, my dear, you have been vexing your mother again. I wish you would try to be more considerate." And he would look at her kindly, and gently, and weakly through his high-power spectacles.

Eleanor hated vexing anybody. She wanted all the world, particularly the lame, and the halt, and the blind, and all the animal creation, particularly ugly puppies and timid cats, and worn-out horses, to have a happy time, and she was willing and anxious to advance their happiness with a great deal of trouble of her own. But, except as regards her father, she did not in the least feel sorry for having played "La Donna e Mobile" with such spirit on the organ, because the

pain which it conceivably gave to her stepmother for devotional reasons she felt sure was altogether outweighed by the pleasure she would feel in doing her duty when she told her husband and pained him. Eleanor did not consider this a failure in amiability on the part of Mrs. Ramsden; she confined herself to the undoubted fact that it was this performance of a duty (which might or might not be painful) that would give her pleasure. She would in the same spirit (and did) give much of her goods to feed the poor, and had once cheerfully burned, if not her body, both her hands very severely in putting out the clothes of a child who had set fire to himself at a Christmas-tree. The effect was that the child was not hurt at all, so prompt was her aid, but he was hurt afterwards when Mrs. Ramsden repeated the occurrence to his mother, adding that she had repeatedly warned the children not to touch the candles. But in no reasonable mind could there be any doubt as to the overwhelming weight that duty occupied in the spiritual economy of Mrs. Ramsden. She "put out" the small male infant, with risk to herself, as cheerfully and ungrudgingly as she repeated his misconduct afterwards to his mother.

All September mellowed, and dozed, and melted on this windless Saturday evening when Eleanor left the church with Tommie Lake panting behind her. There was trouble to come, since her stepmother was going to report the Verdi incident to her husband; but to Eleanor there was already balm for that prospective hurt in the infinitesimal fact that Tommie Lake said to her as she locked the church-door: "That was a narse tune you played last, miss!" For she liked pleasure, whether her own or somebody else's, with greater keenness than she disliked pain. She would, so to speak, choose to be caned on both hands if by the double hurt somebody else felt pleasure in one hand. Also this September evening, the mellow doziness of it, the melting sense of summer that still lingered in it, the suggestion of something infinite that lurked in the long shadows and hazy brightness, filled her, as Tommie Lake scuttled off towards the cricket-field below the Rectory, with a feeling that was only to be expressed by a long-drawn breath and an unconscious smile. Sensitive from the light down on her cheek to the inmost beating of her heart, she could not but be lost in the richness of this golden evening.

The Church of St. Peter, out of which she had just come, lay to the west of Bracebridge, but lower than it by a mile of

swift-flowing chalk-streams, so that the direct rays of the sun, near to its setting below the high ridge of westerly down, still gilded the roofs and straight-rising smoke of the town, while she and the churchyard, with its grey mossy graves, were immersed in the early twilight. To north and south the sides of the valley climbed steeply, and the serge-clad down of the Surrey hills, faded a little by the hot summer, still basked in the level light, while here in the narrowed plain between them the sunlight but touched the church-tower. Over the lower-lying water-meadows that bounded the churchyard to the south the skeins of dew had begun to spin their magical webs. As yet they hovered some ten feet from the ground, not yet condensed into the diamonds and pearls that sunrise would surprise on the grass next morning. But Bracebridge Beacon, with its clumps of native firs, still flamed above the dews and dusk, and to the north of the valley the windows of the villa above the town flared as with fire within.

Parallel with, and adjoining the churchyard was the creeper-covered Parsonage, and as Eleanor came into the garden from the little swinging gate her father came out of the house. For the moment her absorption in the serene evening had banished from her mind the episode of the organ, but the sight of him reminded her of it, and she instantly made up her mind to tell him herself.

"Oh, daddy," she said, taking his arm, "I did such a dreadful thing just now. You see, it happened like this. I had been playing the organ for the choir-practice, and I had got so tired of Ferris's anthem and Uncle Evelyn's service, so, when I had finished practising—of course, the choir had gone away—I pulled out every stop in the organ and played 'La Donna e Mobile' at the top of its voice!"

Mr. Ramsden looked at her in his vague and kindly manner.

"My dear, was that necessary?" he asked.

"Yes, daddy, I had to. Of course, it was a pity that I had to."

"Well, well, and you thought you would like to tell me."

"Yes. You see, there was a meeting in the vestry, and, of course, mother heard it, and came in. She said she was going to tell you, so I thought I might as well."

"And she didn't like it," observed Mr. Ramsden, feeling that the statement was not hazardous.

"No. I am sorry. I hope you don't mind much, daddy."

Mr. Ramsden stood hatless, facing the glory of the western heavens for a moment. The red that blazed there faintly

tinged his plump cherubic face and the plentiful iron-grey hair that covered his head. Something, either the sunset or a memory, called up by Eleanor's remarks had abstracted his attention from the situation in hand, and he looked at her without replying.

"Dear me, yes," he said at length. "'La Donna e Mobile.' It isn't very much like the anthem and chants you had just been playing, my dear Nellie. I wonder what put it into your head. Most inappropriate, my dear—most inappropriate. I don't wonder that mother was vexed."

He gave a little sigh, in which memory had its part.

"I was in Naples, I remember, just after it had come out, with your dear mother. It simply got into the air; there is nothing else to express it. The trains used to puff it, the horses used to whinny it, the dogs used to bark it. She used to tell me I whistled it in my sleep, and she used to wake me up by singing it. I dare say it is in your blood, my dear; you were born very soon after. Dear me, yes! You must go to Italy some day with me, and we will see all the places. Funny little tinkly tune! I dare say it is quite cheap and common, but there's something in my heart that twangs like a Neapolitan guitar when it is mentioned. It is singular, though; I have not thought of it for years."

His gentle face still looked towards the sunset, and was mildly and pinkly illuminated. His forty-five years had done but little carving and delving, even round the outer corners of his blue eyes, now a little dim with reminiscence. He took off his spectacles and wiped them.

"Oddly enough, the thought of Italy was very vividly with me this afternoon," he continued. "So much so, my dear, that I could not get on with my Harvest Festival sermon, and came out to be soaked in an English September evening. And your mentioning that Verdi tune brought it all back again with a rush."

Eleanor took his arm as they walked together towards the orchard.

"Oh, daddy, it didn't hurt, I hope?" she asked.

"My dear, everything hurts a little which reminds you of when you were very young, and had so much youth still in front of you. I suppose I ought to go back and continue writing my sermon, but if you don't mind, I think we will stroll a little. Or were you wanting to do anything else, Nellie?"

"Nothing so much as to have a walk with you, daddy," she said.

"That is very nice of you. You do remind me so much sometimes of your mother. When you said that, your voice was so like hers."

"Oh, daddy, how silly you are!" she said. "Why, mother was beautiful, if she was the least like that little picture you have of her."

"I know, my dear. But you are very like her."

"With all the beauty left out."

He made an apologetic pause.

"Why, yes," he said; "I suppose that is omitted. But you've got a very nice face, Nellie."

She laughed.

"Go on about Italy," she said.

This was by no means a light request, for it was the rarest thing in her world that her father should speak of Italy or her mother at all, and of the former she knew little more than a few sketches made by him of Paraggi, where, so she vaguely was aware, he met and married her mother; and of her little more than the picture in question told her. It had not infrequently happened that he had begun to speak to her of her mother, who had died when she was still not a year old, but as frequently he had broken the subject off before it matured in any way. But somehow, with the unfailing intuition which resides in women as mysteriously as some sense inexplicable resides in the antennæ of moths, she knew that the subject withered, not because he had nothing to tell her, but because he had too much. Deep down in his heart, she was aware, there lay a great quiet lake of memory. Sometimes she suspected that it had been artificially frozen over, and that her stepmother skated, so to speak, on the top of it. Hitherto, as often as the ice had got thin, there came a sudden frost which made it bear again, and she had longed, times without number, that the thaw would be more complete. She felt sure that her stepmother, even if immersed, was perfectly capable of swimming strongly to land. Besides, Alice would be there with lifebuoys.

There was silence.

"Go on about Italy," she repeated, with a sudden insistency. "I want to know."

For the moment the cherubic content of his face deserted him, and he looked sharply at her. But apparently that look that peeped out, quick as a lizard, was reassuring, and he was a middle-aged cherub again.

"Well, we must go to Italy together, my dear, some time,"

he said. "You are half Italian, you see, though I am sure no one would have thought it. Italy now! How well I can imagine the country round Naples, where she and I went after our marriage, and where we heard 'Rigoletto' on such an evening as this! There is no harvest festival there, as we understand it, in the way of corn. I don't even quite know if there is corn there at all, and I think they must import it from somewhere. But the autumn festival is the vintage. There is nothing but grapes. I suppose now they put them into hydraulic presses and squeeze them, which I dare say is much more convenient and hygienic, but in the year of which I am talking there was none of that. The oxen used to draw great trucks laden with baskets of grapes up to the side of the vat —a sort of small bathing-tank, my dear—and then the boys and young men jumped in, with their trousers turned up to their knees at first, and later on, when the vat filled, much higher than that, and trod the grapes. It was all very gay. I suppose you and Alice now would call it a high old time."

"Oh, daddy, did you dance on the grapes, too?" asked the girl. "And did mother?"

"No; she never did, my dear," said Mr. Ramsden, adjusting the silver cross he wore on his watch-chain, "because women were never allowed to go into the vat, as they said it turned the wine sour, which I am sure was some sort of pagan superstition. But I have several times danced, as you call it, on the grapes. The people said that the Signor Inglese, which means the English gentleman, did twice as much work as any of their young men. They were very polite about it. On the other hand, I used to do it for fun, and they paid me no wages. Perhaps that was the reason; they said it just to encourage me."

Eleanor laughed.

"Oh, daddy, to think of you dancing on the grapes with the other Italian boys!" she said.

He straightened himself up a little—for he had had a slight attack of lumbago, which felt better—and coquetted with memory.

"I am sure I don't see why I should not," he said. "There is nothing so ridiculous about it, my dear. It would have been very foolish of me to give myself airs like a tourist, and only look in my guide-book, and ask the way to some church or museum. Besides, we were staying with some South Italian cousins of your mother's, who had a famous vineyard and labour was scarce that year. All the young men of the

family trod the grapes. Yes ; I am sure you would call it a high old time. And when we came back in the evening there would be supper and music. Your mother sang most sweetly—indeed, most sweetly. But she was no great proficient on the piano. You play far more correctly than she ever did, my dear."

They had come to the orchard, which lay at the back of the Vicarage garden. Eleanor had left there the rug on which she had sat reading her play when the summons came that she should attend choir-practice and take the place (though with less power of expression) of Mr. Courtney, and the two sat down there again. Under one arm she still held the Parish Magazine, with the copy of "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" embedded in it, but as she sat down it slipped from its defences and tumbled on the grass. Her father picked it up for her.

"Ah, a very clever play," he said. "I went with your mamma to see it. She did not like it, I remember—in fact, we never saw the last act. But—do you think, Nellie, she would like you reading it? Indeed, I am not sure that I do."

Eleanor took it from a slightly resisting hand.

"Oh, daddy, don't bother!" she said. "There isn't any harm in anything, unless you want to find it. I don't want to."

Again the cherubic expression left him.

"But, my dear, isn't it a little advanced, don't you think?" he asked.

"Well, perhaps the advanced parts are the ones I don't quite understand," said she. "But it is so wonderful. Do let me finish it."

"But do you think that your mother would like——" he began.

"*My* mother?" she said, with an intonation that was wholly unconscious.

"I think you had better give it me," said Mr. Ramsden.

"Yes, daddy, if you wish. But are you sure you wish it?"

He looked at her eager innocent face. He remembered what she had said—that there was no harm unless you looked for it.

"This is a private transaction," he observed.

Eleanor nodded her assent and approval, and sat down on the book.

"Italy, daddy," she said ; "and mother."

"Well . . . we were both very young. I was twenty-five,

which I dare say seems to you quite old, but it isn't. She was eighteen—about as old, really, as I was. And there was just one year, my dear. She died when she was as old as you. No, a year older than you. You are eighteen, are you not? Yes, yes; a year older than you. Seventeen and two: nineteen. And she was Italy; Italy is just she. Autumn and the grapes, Nellie, and spring and the wild orchids, and summer and lizards on the walls, and winter and the wood fires! Dear me, it seems like a sort of poem!"

Eleanor gave a long sigh. She had never heard as much before. The sigh began in satisfaction; it ended in a sort of wild regret for things she had never known.

"Oh, daddy, my heart aches!" she said.

CHAPTER II

MRS. RAMSDEN'S temperament was as angular as her person, which was as angular as a turnip-ghost. In neither (if, indeed, in any of them) was there a rounded corner; you could no more pass close to her without being pricked by her knee or elbow than you could live with her without coming in contact with similar acute and lancelike projections of her mind. There were to her no such things as venial sins or faults that were better corrected with a smile instead of a frown. Either a thing was right, or it was wrong, for, if not, as she sometimes remarked, "Where are we?" She, it may be mentioned, was usually there.

With regard to lovable qualities she was less effectively equipped. She was not highly favoured with them herself, though she was a perfect agglomeration of virtues and at all cardinal points she was fully, if not aggressively, furnished. It was this, perhaps, that made her so preternaturally sensitive to the joints in the armour of other Christians, and she observed with petulant alacrity how numerous were their joints, and how frequently the darts of the Evil One penetrated them. Probably there was no society in England which stamped on wickedness and discouraged diversions to which she did not belong and generally subscribe, but her name was not so widely associated with those institutions of which the object is to make fellow-sufferers from the fever of life happier. She wanted to make them good, or, if not that, to put discouragement in the way of their being bad. These appeared to her to be the same thing, which they are not. Yet, with so dominant a sense of duty, she was not wholly devoid of an appreciation of mundane pleasures, though she looked upon them rather in the light of refreshment to make her return with greater zeal to her combat with the wiles of the devil. She liked people to go out before breakfast, and take brisk walks in the afternoon; she liked them even to play halma after dinner, and to defeat them herself. She by no means thought of the world as a vale of woe; she was aware

that it was a very pleasant place if you were gifted with irreproachable principles, though she was more than equally aware that it was a mere honeycomb of temptations if you were not. She was fond of the proposition that one thing "led on to" another, and disliked card-playing for that reason. It led to gambling, and gambling led to drunkenness, and drunkenness led to the devil. Thus post-prandial diversions at the Vicarage did not include any form of card-playing. Indeed, she was on the verge of thinking that the actual pieces of pasteboard adorned with kings and queens and various pips were things in themselves not proper, like violent language and doubtful jokes. For the same sort of reason she disliked gaiety, though she often laughed herself at a certain type of joke, of which the story of the curate's egg may be taken as an example, and told that particular story herself very often and with great success; but in the general way gaiety led to levity, and levity led to the devil, just as drunkenness did. It may be mentioned that she was the daughter of a Viscount who was also a clergyman, and liked his letters addressed "The Reverend the Viscount." For, as he truly said, he was a Reverend by choice and a Viscount by accident. But since his birth was perfectly regular, it really looked as if he was a Viscount on purpose. The reader will grasp Mrs. Ramsden's mind with crucial accuracy if he will fully understand that she approved of her father's joke about himself, but would not have approved of the subjoined comment to it.

That evening the daughter of the accidental Viscount was having supper by herself, since the Mothers' Meeting occupied her time till seven, which was the dinner-hour at the Vicarage, and at seven she had to go to see what she believed to be "a very sad case," and one on which she knew exactly where she was. She did not get home till nearly ten, and had egg, cocoa, and marmalade. Her husband came to sit with her, the girls having gone up to bed, and, when she had assuaged the first pangs of hunger, she was able to talk about the very sad case, and other things.

"And to think that she was a kitchen-maid of my own!" she said. For the moment Mr. Ramsden drew the inference that other people's kitchen-maids didn't matter so much. "You prepared her for confirmation yourself, too."

Mr. Ramsden corrected his first impression. The particular sadness was that one who had had the advantage of living in their house should have swooped into sin.

"But I have a very shrewd suspicion who the father is," continued his wife. "I could not ask her because she was asleep."

"And the child?" asked Mr. Ramsden.

"I understand the child is a healthy male," said his wife, finishing her toast and marmalade.

Mr. Ramsden fidgeted in his chair.

"But, my dear," he said at length, "are you quite certain that the birth of this healthy male was—was irregular? Is it not possible that poor Fanny was married?"

"Then where is her husband?" asked Mrs. Ramsden.

"I could not say. But I gather that, for all you know, my dear, there may be one somewhere."

"I should have known if Fanny was married," said she. "I must have known. But I know nothing of that."

"And whom do you suspect of being the father?" asked he.

"The postman," said she, in a subdued whisper. "Often and often I have seen him talking to Fanny when he gave the letters in, though why a postman should have anything to say to a kitchen-maid that required whispering—for whispering it was, and I could never overhear a word, not that I tried—passed my comprehension at the time, but is explained now. No doubt in the past I was too trustful of others. It never occurred to me that there could be anything wrong, and now this! I have finished supper, James, and so please smoke if you feel inclined."

Apparently he did not.

"But, my dear, let us look at the whole situation more unsuspiciously," he said. "Fanny, in whom you are so kind as to feel so much interest, has had a baby. As you say, you just met her by chance going down the High Street two days ago, and found she was living at a lodging-house. But that is a perfectly respectable thing to do. And to-day you found she had had a baby. That, also, is a perfectly respectable thing to do. It often happens. And, if you have told me all you know, there is no further reason for supposing that there is any irregularity about it. Then, with regard to the postman, you may or may not be right. But, after all, he may be her husband."

"I am prepared for the worst," said Mrs. Ramsden, with a finality that admitted of no misunderstanding.

She finished the last drops of her cocoa, and gave a great sigh.

"My greatest desire, James, is not to distress you unnecessarily, but as regards all this, I felt it my duty not to

leave you unprepared. Now, about other things. We had a practice of the choir this afternoon, and in the indisposition of Mr. Courtney, of which you may not have heard (influenza, and a temperature of 103°), Eleanor took the organ for him. I am bound to say that she played very fairly, though, of course, there was nothing of that deeply religious touch which Mr. Courtney has. That, however, I could not expect from Eleanor, and I did not. However, as I say, she played very fairly, and I am glad to say I thanked her. I suggested to her, when the choir-practice was over, that she should remain at the organ and practice by herself, for we are doing Ferris's anthem, and Uncle Evelyn's Service. Even Mr. Courtney says that the latter is by no means easy, so what must it be to Eleanor? Well, the Mothers' Meeting took place in the vestry afterwards, and in the middle I suddenly heard the organ blare out. She must have pulled every stop out, which Mr. Courtney seldom does. He says that there is hardly ever any need to employ the full organ with our comparatively small choir. But it wasn't that which arrested my attention; it was what she played. It was a sort of waltz tune, and she said it was by Verdi. On the organ, and in church! I was terribly upset."

"Eleanor has told me," said her husband.

"There again! I said to her that I felt myself obliged to tell you, and one would have thought that was enough. But of course, if Eleanor has told you, why, you know."

The conclusion appeared sound, when it was pointed out. It did not occur to Mrs. Ramsden to put into words what she really meant—namely, that Eleanor had taken the wind out of her sails in breaking the terrible news to her father. And yet Mrs. Ramsden was by no means wholly unamiable; in the main her perpetual dissatisfaction with other people was due to the desire that causes for dissatisfaction should eventually be eradicated, and, as she sometimes said, unless a person's faults were pointed out, he would probably go on in ignorance of them, and thus not be enabled to correct them. But the duty of pointing them out, which so clearly in Eleanor's case devolved on her, since Eleanor had no mother, had unfortunately sweetened the process of doing so, and it would be idle for the impartial observer to pretend that it was at all unpleasant to her. Even if it had been, her sense of duty would have made her point them out just the same. She also, on her side, fully desired, in the abstract, that her own faults should be pointed out to her; and if ever her husband

did so, she thanked him with a certain strained effusiveness, and begged that on all future occasions also he would not spare her. She might not, she would say, quite understand what he meant, but for the future she would be on her guard, and look out for any such tendency in herself as he had kindly mentioned. Strangely enough, this somewhat metallic humility did not encouarge a repetition of critical remarks.

"Eleanor, I must say, might have told me that she intended to let you know herself," she went on, "and thus have spared me the pain of telling you; but that is a very small matter."

Mr. Ramsden's gentle and peace-loving soul was stirred into championship on behalf of his daughter.

"My dear, I don't suppose she intended to tell me," he said. "She formed no resolve to tell me: she just acted on impulse."

Mrs. Ramsden drew in her breath with a little hiss, such as people make when some painful memory shocks or wounds them, and went on with earnest volubility.

"Impulse, yes," she said. "There you have hit the nail on the head, my dear James. "It is just impulse that is poor Eleanor's greatest and most insidious enemy. She doesn't think; she doesn't consider that it is of our words and actions that life is composed and character formed. Do not imagine for a moment that I think she played that terrible tune out of intentional cold-blooded profanity, saying to herself, 'This is the Lord's House; I will therefore I will make a mock——'"

Mr. Ramsden could not help interrupting.

"My dear, my dear!" he said.

"I am telling you, James, that such thoughts were not in my mind, and you speak as if they were. No; I only accuse Eleanor of lightness and want of reflection. And just after the choir-practice, too, when you would have thought that, if any tune rang in her head, so that without thought she played it, it would be some beautiful and sacred melody. However, since Eleanor has told you, it ceases to be my business, and I am sure I am very glad it is so. You, no doubt, have expressed your mind to her, and I do not even ask you to tell me what you said."

And she waited for him to do so.

"I didn't say much," he observed. "I told her it was most inappropriate. She said she was sorry she had vexed you."

Mrs. Ramsden folded up her napkin, and put round it the napkin-ring made out of wood from the Mount of Olives, with some curious blottesque-looking printing on it, believed to be Hebrew characters.

"It matters very little whether she vexes me or not, James," she said. "And I am sure I had no thought whatever of self about it. What matters is that she played that tune in waltz-time in the church."

A queer, humorous smile came over her husband's face. "But, my dear, there is nothing immoral in waltz tunes," he said. "Three crochets to the bar is not inherently base. In fact, 'Fight the good fight' is in what you call waltz-time."

Mrs. Ramsden rose.

"Of course, then, if you agree with Eleanor, and think she is perfectly right to play an operatic air in a sacred building and on a sacred instrument——"

"But I don't. I told her it was most inappropriate. So it was. Also I do mind the fact that she vexed you. I don't like your being vexed."

"That, dear James, I repeat, was not in my mind. I am used to having my attitude towards many things being misunderstood—though I do not say wilfully—by Eleanor."

"But I am not used to it," said he, "and it is often in my mind, my dear. And yet I do not see what remedy to suggest unless——"

Mrs. Ramsden became all attention.

"Pray, if there is any criticism you can make with regard to my bearing towards Eleanor, make it," she said. "By this time, James, you ought to know how I welcome anything of the sort. I am, I hope, conscious of many defects of my own, but I am sure there are many more of which, unhappily, I am unconscious. You will do me a great service by mentioning them."

"Well, my dear, I think if perhaps you allowed a little more for Eleanor's youth and her great vitality. She feels tremendously; she is very much alive, and that is such a good thing in itself that, even when it is manifested in rather thoughtless ways, I think we should remember what that thoughtlessness comes from. It comes from youth and eagerness."

Mrs. Ramsden looked at her husband with her black beady eyes, that resembled those of a bird.

"I see," she said. "Thank you, James. I am not suffi-

ciently in sympathy with youth and eagerness and life. Is that it ? I want to grasp your meaning clearly. Do I understand you rightly ?"

That was characteristic of her ; she turned all that came near her to cast-iron. Nothing to which she directed her mind could remain of the nature of a hint or a suggestion. As with a forceps she drew the core of the matter out of the integuments that clothed and qualified it, and presented it to you, saying, " I think this is what you mean." And though, as in this case, her conclusion was just, if looked at like that, the very fact of looking at it like that falsified it. And, as so many times before, her husband found himself presented with a truth so plainly put that it almost ceased to be true.

" I should not put it quite like that, my dear ?" he said.

" Then, I have not quite understood you ?" asked his wife brightly. " Can you make it more plain to me ? I want so much to grasp exactly what you mean."

Mr. Ramsden thought for a moment. After all, he had meant that ; but his meaning seemed different to what she had put in a gun, so to speak, and fired back at him with bull's-eye precision.

" It is a question of attitude and indulgence and allowance," he said. " We are not all made quite in the same mould, and I am sure that Eleanor misunderstands you just as much as you misunderstand her. But that is the natural fault of young people, my dear. They are naturally less tolerant, because they have less experience. I mean, we must make allowance for them, and not expect them to make so much allowance for us."

Mrs. Ramsden leaned earnestly forward in her chair, knitting her long, thin fingers together.

" Ah ! I cannot wholly agree with you there, James," she said. " Little as we all want to judge others, yet we should fall vastly short of our duty if we did not try to point out, and so enable them to correct, all that falls below the very highest standard. And if we once begin to make allowances, our standard falls. 'Be ye therefore perfect.' Surely that warns us against being content with anything but the highest. I remember your preaching about it, and I found it most helpful."

It was like sitting directly under a bright electric lamp with precise whirling machinery going on overhead. That which in Mrs. Ramsden's youth had been high principle and energy had by use become like tense catgut incessantly

twanged. What she said was no doubt perfectly true, but it was of terrible texture. Appreciative as her husband was of her untiring zeal, and devoted as he was with all the dependence of an easy-going man to the extraordinary efficiency of his wife, he was conscious to-night of this toughness.

"But a little tenderness, my dear," he said, "surely is not forbidden."

"But we must be on our guard," said she, lighting a bedroom candle, "not to confuse tenderness with weakness."

That was a danger that really did not much threaten her, for she was not troubled with either quality.

Something in his talk with his wife, or in his talk with Eleanor, or in the conjoined effect of the two, made Mr. Ramsden strangely disinclined either to finish up the Harvest Festival sermon, which he had to preach to-morrow evening, and, as he knew perfectly well, required another hour's work, or to go upstairs after his wife. Instead, when he went to the front-door to lock up as usual for the night, he strolled out again into the garden, with that instinctive desire for darkness and quiet that unconsciously possesses the mind in self-communing and introspective mood. The moon had set, but the dimmed stars in the west and the luminance of the sky there showed that it was still not much below the horizon. Against that veiled brightness the church-tower stood out with etched precision, but all else, sight and sound and smell alike, was hushed in the thick, soft darkness. The fragrance of the garden-beds was veiled—veiled, too, the dew-drenched chalices of the incense-breathing flowers, and the pulse of the train labouring up the steep incline to the west was muffled and drowsy. The mists that had lain like carded fleeces over the water-meadows at sunset were still stretched there, "softer than sleep," and to the east the lights of Bracebridge were blurred and diffused. With that instinct for silence that accompanies the dark, he stepped off the gravel path, and moved quietly on the lawn which ran alongside the house. Upstairs a light had just sprung up in his wife's bedroom; two windows farther along, Eleanor's blind showed a square of illumination. It was clear that Eleanor was reading in bed, a practice discouraged by her stepmother. But there were many practices of poor Nellie that were similarly treated. And with the thought of Eleanor, his mind, swifter than the wings of swallows seeking the South, was in Italy again.

All those who have reached middle age, and who have done

any real living, have within them the ashes and embers of past romance, never quite cold, always faintly glowing, ready to be kindled into momentary flame again. It wanted but little encouragement from James Ramsden on this soft summer night to make Italy and Elisabeth alive and burning again within him. Their fire had never quite been quenched, though since that blaze, now twenty years ago, had soared to heaven, no other fire of romance had been lit in his heart. After her death—and little more than a year after her death, it is true—he had married again, and been happy with the obvious human bliss. . . . But before his thoughts came home with folded wings, so to speak, uplifted on the sunlit air no longer, he traced to himself the passage of the two Southern years.

He was but twenty-four when, as a smart young soldier in the Guards, he had left London with a friend to ramble for a month in Northern Italy. His father had died the year before, leaving him comfortably off for a young bachelor, even one who was alert for pleasure, and somewhat remarkably keen in its pursuit. At Genoa, however, his friend had been called back to England on some peremptory business, and Jim Ramsden, in whom the spell of the land had already begun to work, though disgusted with the desertion, had decided to wander by himself for a little. But soon his disgust deserted him, as the magic wove itself about him, and, sensitive to impressions and dangerously impulsive as he was, he abandoned himself with ardour to the soft sensuous life that fills the days without need of employment. From Genoa he had gone to Rapallo, from there to Santa Margherita, and the end of May saw him at Paraggi, bathing and boating, and still with no date fixed for his already belated departure to England, where the world was dining and dancing in a way that had seemed so absorbing to him last year, and so strangely remote now. Then one morning a notice-board "Si affitta" signified that a little villa, just behind his hotel, buried in orange-trees and roses, was to let, and before evening he had taken it for the next two months; and, to salve his conscience for this irresponsible freak, had asked a couple of friends to stay with him, trusting (not in vain, as it turned out) that they would find it impossible. A stout capable *contadina*, who had had experience of the ways of foreigners, and their unlimited desire for food, was soon found to take charge of the kitchen, and with her she brought her daughter Elisabetta to help her in looking after the house. The mother was from Posilippo, and the girl took after her in the matter

of warm sun-tinted skin, and blue-black hair, dark wide-lidded eyes, and pomegranate mouth, ever quivering with smiles and ready to break out into white-toothed laughter, while Jim Ramsden, white skinned and blue eyed, with the close-cropped yellow hair that was the gift of his fatherhood to Eleanor, was the complement of the other. A smile and a *bon giorno* quickly led to the result that was not less than natural to a young man bursting with manhood and leading the outdoor sunny life, half in the sea and half on it, that brings about the perfection of physical health and vigour. In other words, he fell gaily in love with Elisabetta.

To do him justice, he made a determined effort to follow the course that wisdom and prudence suggested, to pack his trunk and turn his back at once on the rose-terraced villa and her who had become the spirit and essence of it; and one night, as he was sitting on the terrace beneath the velvet of the star-kindled sky, with Elisabetta, who had just brought him his tray with biscuits and white wine and Nocera water, lingering, as now happened every evening, to chat with him, he said suddenly:

"And after to-morrow I go back to England."

Elisabetta was standing in the oblong of light that streamed from the dining-room door, which was wide open, and he saw her face change and grow white.

"The signor goes back to England?" she said, in a voice that was no more than a whisper.

Jim saw that, heard her changed voice, and, with a sudden fire of joy, guessed what it meant. But for a moment more he clung to his resolve.

"Yes; it is wiser so, Elisabetta," he said. "I daren't stop. I——"

Those beautiful lips suddenly parted, a great sob rose in her throat, and her eyes streamed.

"Dio mio! Dio mio!" she exclaimed.

Then, whether he moved first to her, or she to him, neither ever knew. But next moment, impelled by the great instinctive and irresistible force that governs the world, they were flung each into the arms of the other, and she was his as surely as he was hers.

The weeks went on, and now there was no more any talk of England, and one day late in July again Elisabetta came to him with tears beneath the stars. So, again disobeying, and this time with nobler disobedience, all that wisdom and prudence counselled, he married her.

He had but few ties of near relationship in England. To his mother he wrote, saying that he had married this girl of the people, and it was his intention to sell out of the army, and live for some months, at any rate, in Italy before coming back home. His letter manifested all that he so loyally meant to conceal—namely, that he would sooner superintend the earlier steps of his wife's education alone—and the picture his mother mentally drew of Elisabetta was of a far more boorish rusticity than the original warranted. This picture (she being a woman who was accustomed to speak her mind) she so deftly indicated in her answer that correspondence between the two ceased altogether. Then for Jim began a year of strange experience. The villa at Paraggi, at which he had contemplated a summer and autumn of ecstatic happiness, became untenable owing to the inroads of really impossible relations, who settled on him as a flock of rooks settles on a newly turned field, and brought with them hordes of friends from the neighbouring farms and villages, to show off to them the magnificent Signor Inglese, of golden hair and property, who had married into their family. From all circumstances, largest to least, there was no possibility of continuing here. His mother-in-law, for instance, could not remain in the kitchen and cook for him and his wife upstairs; but she was far more impossible in the capacity of mother than in that of cook. Her husband, too, had left his shop, where he sold tobacco and salted anchovies, in Santa Margherita, in charge of his son, and apparently contemplated making a long stay at the villa. So as soon as could be decently arranged, Jim and his wife left a station crowded with excited relations who had come to see them off, and went South to Rome and Naples. Here Elisabetta was to learn both her husband's language and the general manners and cultivation of the classes among whom her home would be for the future. The latter, though love fired her docility, Jim found to be a task utterly beyond his powers. As daughter of his cook, the prettiest girl and the gayest in all Liguria, she had enchanted and captured him; as companion and friend she was just all she had been before, but nothing more. A hundred little tricks which had been the prettiest quaintnesses while the physical attraction was growing so potent, all during the month of June, became pin-pricks of irritation to him, and their points sharpened rather than the opposite as the weeks went on.

Then in the winter came the birth of Eleanor, and with it a thousand more jangles. The mother was for looking after

the child in the manner of the peasant, swathing it, mummy-fashion, hanging charms about it, performing all the superstitious rites of her class, whereas the English doctor who attended them and the English nurse would have none of these things; and Elisabetta cried herself sick with dismay at the thought of her child being so unnaturally treated, so undefended against the bogies that every mother knew lay couched round the cradles of babies newly born. Then followed the difficulties about the Church to which the girl should belong, a question to which neither had given serious consideration; there followed, too, Elisabetta's mother from Santa Margherita, appearing unannounced and voluble and luggageless. She was but the vanguard of other relations.

Yet in those months, and in the months that followed, there were hours of exquisite happiness for both of them, when, with the child on her knee, she would sit by him in the sharp-outlined shadow of the vines in the pergola, and sing very sweetly, as he had told Eleanor, half to him, half to her, the baby-songs that a thousand years of Italian mothers had crooned to their children; and they would talk over the early days, and recapture their unqualified ecstasy. Nor was there much effort needed; it was as if the million jars and differences that of necessity existed between them were but the rind that could so easily be peeled off the fruit that lay within, cool and sweet and secret. Yet then again the child would cry, and Elisabetta was for giving it sugar, and Jim was for finding that the shade was chilly.

Then, with unlooked-for, incredible suddenness, came the end. A case or two of cholera had appeared in Naples, and, while yet there seemed no cause for alarm, Elisabetta caught it. She died within twenty-four hours.

His mother had found it incumbent on her to say what she thought on the occasion of his marriage; now, with equal plainness, she acted. She came out from England without delay, and took charge of him and his affairs with a firmness and kindness wholly admirable. The kindness was for him, the firmness reserved for the hordes of preying relations, to whom, in curious Italian (though quite unmistakable in its meaning), she indicated her policy. "Non ho bisogno di voi, e mio filio non ha bisogno di voi," was the text of those remarkable monologues. The English mamma was too much for them, for, though they could perfectly well understand her Italian, she could not understand theirs, and, in answer to passionate

expostulations on their part, she merely repeated what she had already said. Finally, she paid all their fares (second class) back to their homes, upon which they departed, going third class. But they went.

That duty, which really verged on being a pleasure, being successfully accomplished, she devoted herself entirely to her son. Bitterly and whole-heartedly as he mourned his wife, there was no question that he found immense comfort in the sense of strain removed by the advent of his mother and her dispersal of his wife's relations. Meantime the cholera threatened to spread, and in under the week she had him home again in England, in her quiet, well-established house in Hampshire. But into that year of Italian life he had put all the fund of romance that was in his nature, and it was a very different young man from him who, not eighteen months ago, had started abroad for a capering and kicking-up of heels, who now came to himself again in this English home. His alertness for pleasure seemed to have altogether departed, giving place to a certain seriousness of mind, which looked with a sort of incredulous wonder on the mode of life which had hitherto been his, and with a certain shrinking horror on the weeks which had preceded his marriage. Behind that there was native to him a great kindness of heart, a great desire generally that the people about him should be comfortable and good. He saw much, too, of the Reverend the Viscount Rolleston, who has already been incidentally mentioned—a widower whose house was admirably administered by his daughter, less incidentally concerned with the reader. Remarriage, not only for his own sake, but for that of his little daughter, was already contemplated by him, and assumed by his mother, and within two years he was curate and son-in-law to Lord Rolleston. Some five years later the incumbency of St. Peter's, Bracebridge, falling vacant, his father-in-law presented him to it, and here for fifteen years he had lived, beloved by his people, not only for his kindness, but for a certain comprehension of life and its troubles and temptations. He was not shocked ; he did not judge. " Oh, that was a pity, was it not ?" was among his more strongly expressed condemnations, and " We must think what is the best thing to be done now," the almost immediate sequel.

But to-night, as James Ramsden wandered under the stars, when he should either have been finishing up his Harvest

Festival sermon, or at any rate recuperating his powers in sleep, preparatory to doing so on the morrow, these fifteen years, so long in point of time compared with that one year of Southern life, seemed strangely short, and, in painter's phrase, without value. He was a godly Christian, orthodox in belief and industrious in practice. Yet for a little while this evening his words, and deeds, and beliefs all seemed grey in comparison to a certain remembered fire, blown up to life again by the sun-dried, insignificant fact that Eleanor had played "La Donna e Mobile" on the church organ. All that at the time had been so irritating, all the sources of innumerable little quarrels and disagreements had dried up, leaving crystalline and golden sands behind, golden with the sparkle of Italian noons, crystalline with the clear darkness of Italian nights. Dimly seen in the shadow of the vine-trellis, or radiantly illuminated by the light from the open door at the villa, was Elisabetta, still shy, still stranger to him, but day by day irresistibly drawn closer to him. Her sweetness, her beauty, her love, was what was left him, of her love the memory, of its incarnation Eleanor.

Everyone is a pagan in the time of youth, if there is enough vitality in him to enable him to preserve to middle age the virile salt of life. There must be, that is to say, in every proper young and growing creature, that lust of living, God-implanted, which for the early years is stronger than anything else. It is as proper to the colt to whinny and kick up its heels as it would be improper to the carriage-horse harnessed to its sedate brougham, and, indeed, the carriage-horse (warranted to pass the most outrageous motor-car without a wince) would not have such stamina of soul unless it had been wild-eyed and eager in its youth, and was disposed now to look on other colts with a kindly and sympathetic eye. That kindly and sympathetic eye was most alive and alert in James Ramsden this evening, as he paced softly on the dewy grass below the star-dusted sky, and, as the circle of completed reflection brought him round again to his starting-point, he thought of Eleanor's escapade on the organ with a warmth that might almost be called congratulatory. Of course, the dear girl had to work off the effect of Blinkthorn and Uncle Evelyn, and, though he honestly wished that the reaction had not followed quite so close on the heels of its provoking cause, he felt himself sympathetically smiling at and approving the reaction itself. She was young, and he

could still remember what that entrancing disquiet of mind and body felt like. And his lips puckered up to whistle the first line of the operatic air, but a sudden sound from the house below which he paced restrained him, and he looked up. Eleanor's window, he scarcely regretted to see, was still an illuminated square, but the sound had come, not from there, but from the blind of his wife's bedroom, smartly rolled up. Simultaneously he saw that a vague white form stood there.

"It has struck twelve, James," she said, "and there is early service to-morrow. Had you not better come in and go to bed?"

Italy whisked away with the speed of a flicked whip-lash.

"Yes, yes, my dear," he said; "I had no notion it was so late. Twelve o'clock! Dear me!"

CHAPTER III

SUNDAY, according to Mrs. Ramsden's method of observance, might be a day of gladness, but it was certainly not a day of rest, being passed from morning till night in a succession of strenuous religious exercises, and she enjoined on others her own indefatigable zeal. Early service was succeeded by a hurried breakfast (at which sausages made their invariable appearance), for she, Eleanor, and Alice all taught in the Sunday-school at ten, while time had to be given to the servants to clear away and wash up, in order to attend the morning service at eleven. That was not over before half-past twelve, and a hot roast-beef lunch followed at one. At this, since it was Sunday, the servants were excused from waiting, and the family waited on each other with the effect that, while Mrs. Ramsden fiercely carved the sirloin, everybody else—her husband, Eleanor, and Alice—all ran into each other with dishes of Yorkshire pudding, and potatoes, and the vegetables of the season, each ministering, with an infinite addition of trouble to the other. In like manner they all changed each other's plates, and, loaded with sugar, and cream, and apple-tart, made fresh collisions over the second course. Then Eleanor would give her father his glass of port, while he gave her lemonade, and Alice handed coffee to her mother, while her mother handed milk to Alice. The lading of an ocean-going steamer could have been accomplished with less labour. There was a mission-chapel two miles from the house, and as soon as lunch was over Mr. Ramsden set off to take afternoon service there, while further varieties of Sunday-schools furnished occupation for the ladies of the household. Eleanor had a class of girls, Mrs. Ramsden another of unwilling labourers and gardeners, while Alice sang hymns in the drawing-room with gorged and shiny-faced infants. Tea succeeded, and at six was Choral Evensong. At eight a family, jaded and dispirited, with the exception of Mrs. Ramsden, sat down to a cold supper at a table paved with lamb, and salad, and blancmange, and

cheese, after which Mrs. Ramsden read the poem out of "The Christian Year" appropriate to the Sunday, and any other poem that illustrated the events of the day. Then, if time permitted, she regaled them further with passages out of "Lives of the Saints," and family prayers at a quarter to ten, read in rotation by each member of the family, and enlivened by a hymn, played by Eleanor, brought on the blessed hour of the bedroom candlestick. To-day this régime had been unusually fatiguing, for an extra choir-practice had taken place between the afternoon Sunday-school and tea, in order that justice should be done to the work of Uncle Evelyn, while after evening service a happy mother had been churched. This entailed the reading of the appropriate poem in "The Christian Year," when the fifteenth Sunday after Trinity had been dealt with. The poem was a favourite with Mrs. Ramsden, and she read it with throaty unction. She came to the stanza :

> "Is there in bowers of endless Spring
> One known from out the seraph-band
> Of softer voice, by smile and wing
> More exquisitely bland?"

She paused at the end of this inconceivable verse.

"What a poet!" she said. "Religion lies at the base of all poetry."

Mr. Ramsden gave a little sigh.

"'More exquisitely bland,'" he said—"'more exquisitely bland!'"

Then on the decorous quiet of the room there came a sudden shriek of laughter, and Eleanor's voice half strangled, in convulsion of merriment born of hysteria and fatigue, said :

"Oh, dad, you silly!"

Then she shrieked with laughter again, and quite suddenly her laughter stopped.

"I am so sorry," she said. "I beg everybody's pardon."

There was a pause.

"I am sure you are not well, Eleanor," said her stepmother. "You would like to go to bed before prayers."

Eleanor stifled a sudden convulsion of her ribs, which were still laughing.

"I think I will," she said, standing up. "Good-ni——"

The laughter broke through the heroic process of stifling at all costs, but after a few moments she dried her eyes.

"I am so sorry," she said. "I have made a perfect disgrace of myself. But I am rather tired."

"I am sure you must be, dear Eleanor," said her stepmother, with entire conviction. "You will be wise to go to bed immediately. I will play the hymn at prayers instead of you."

Eleanor's sudden laughter had awakened Alice, who was discreetly dozing in a screened position. The vehemence of the sound startled her, and she sat up, feeling jangled and tired and cross.

"If you didn't read so late in bed, Nellie," she said in her usual precise tones, "you wouldn't be so tired next day."

She did not exactly intend her mother to hear this, but she did not intend her not to.

"Good-night, Eleanor," said Mrs. Ramsden. "I think you know my feelings about reading in bed."

Eleanor did.

"Oh, Alice, you sneak!" she observed in a whisper. Certainly she did not intend her stepmother to hear that; but Mrs. Ramsden, though she found it necessary to wear glasses when reading small print by artificial light, had remarkably keen hearing. But she made no comment; she only remembered.

"I will read the last stanza again," she said, when Eleanor had left the room. "It is a great favourite of mine."

Eleanor lit her candle in the hall, and went upstairs to her room. The day, it is true, had been amazingly fatiguing and tedious to her, but now that its duties were over she felt tired no longer. From below, as she undressed, came before long the sound of the small chamber-organ in the hall, given to the house by Mrs. Ramsden's father, and at the present moment being played in rather a woolly manner by her stepmother, while the shrill-voiced cook and somewhat mellower parlour-maid sang "We plough the fields and scatter" for the second time that day. In each verse there was a high F, which Mrs. Ramsden took the octave below, and the cook, unable to soar quite to those heights, sang a fine E instead. By the time that was over she was in bed, and, already forgetful of her stepmother's feelings on the subject, blissfully rereading the first act of the play that had so engrossed her last night. What had not been quite clear to her before was intelligible enough now, but she was conscious of no feeling of disgust or abhorrence. The moral aspect of the play did not concern her, for she was utterly engrossed in its dramatic

power. Whatever else Paula was, she was alive, anyhow, she felt; she was concerned with real events, real emotion.

She came to the end of the first act, and let the book lie with page unturned as with youthful impatience she contrasted the genuine (though regrettable) quality of that after-dinner visit with what seemed to her the unreality of the tedious day she had spent herself. All its hours had been passed in feverish performance of what did not seem worth doing at all. She did not believe that the girls she had taught were a whit the better for their pursuit of the Children of Israel through the wilderness of Sin, until they pitched their tents in Rephidim, and how their journeyings could be supposed to be connected with religion it quite baffled her to say. Nor did Uncle Evelyn's setting of the *Magnificat* seem to her to be connected with religion. For all she knew, he was a very religious man, and no doubt his service filled him with profound emotion. But that did not redeem it from being rotten music. Or, perhaps, the Children of Israel and Uncle Evelyn were religious incentives in the minds of other people—of her stepmother, for instance. All Eleanor was quite certain about was that they were not incentives to her.

Yet it was not that she was lacking in either emotion or morality, or in belief; what she was lacking in was conventionality. She could not take the earth, heaven, and hell of another and say it should be hers; in especial she could not adopt or even adapt her stepmother's notions. It was not that Mrs. Ramsden's ideas about either this present life or a future state of existence lacked vividness or decision; it was rather that they lacked love. Sin was sin, and there was the end of it; while presiding over the present and future state of existence sat a Being who, if we pursue Mrs. Ramsden's creed to its end, was a mixture of a policeman and a clergyman. The policeman embodied justice, the clergyman love.

Such a summary was, indeed, no caricature of Mrs. Ramsden's views, and to-night Eleanor wondered afresh at the stony tenor of it. It was a very joyless world that her stepmother laboured so hard to make better, and all her labours never added one moment's happiness to it. She could, and did, alleviate distress, even when such distress was largely the fault of the person she aided; she taught to those around her habits of health, thrift, and industry, and though, so to speak, she often wiped away tears, she did not put smiles in their place. It was here in especial that Eleanor's whole nature

was in radical discord with her stepmother's. The alleviation of distress was, of course, a very excellent work, but how utterly inadequate if you did not encourage happiness to grow where it had been! The eradication of evil tendencies and unedifying practices were equally admirable, but how barren was the work unless joy flowered there instead! Indeed, had Eleanor put into definite words her own idea of the way to manage the world, she would rather have laid down as the prime essential the necessity of making people happy, leaving the evil tendencies to wither of themselves in that divine air and sunshine, even as mildew disappears without any eradication at all in similar conditions. Certainly she wished people to be good, but it appeared to her a grave defect if in the process they lost the sense of the joy of life. Mrs. Ramsden, it is true, did not debar herself or others from the enjoyment of beauty, for had she not caused the choir strenuously to practise Blinkthorn and Uncle Evelyn; but the enjoyment of beauty, in her creed, was definitely to lead the soul to a clearer realization of the truths of her cast-iron religion, while to Eleanor beauty was beauty, and made you laugh for pleasure.

Her meditation was here suddenly interrupted, for there came a tap on her door, and she had but time to blow out her light before her stepmother entered, with her candle considerately shaded by her hand from the bed. There seemed to Eleanor to be no reason why she should notify the fact that she was awake, and she lay still without speaking. Unfortunately, the copy of the play she had been reading still lay outside her bed, and that first, and subsequently the smouldering wick of her hastily extinguished light, caught her stepmother's eye. Then followed what to Eleanor would have been a very dreadful pause if she had been aware of its true nature. Mrs. Ramsden broke it in her clear precise tones.

"I am not aware what I have done, Eleanor," she said, "that you deceive me by pretending to be asleep. But as it is not my habit to find fault or rebuke on Sunday, I will defer what I shall have to say on this subject till to-morrow. I will only ask you first if you have been reading in bed, and, secondly, what it is that you have been reading. If it is some book of devotion, please tell me so. That would make a difference!"

Eleanor sat up in bed, angry and exasperated both at herself and at the tone of this speech.

"I have been reading in bed," she said, "and the book I have been reading is 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray.'"

"The play of that name?" asked Mrs. Ramsden.

"Yes."

"Thank you, Eleanor. One thing further: have you said your prayers?"

"No; I forgot," said Eleanor.

"I will light your candle, then, for you. I will also, please, take that book away. Good-night."

She retired, holding the obnoxious volume at arm's length, as if it was an infectious disease; and Eleanor, annoyed as she was, could scarcely help giggling at the grimness of the attitude. Yet she knew it was genuine; her stepmother would have carried the book in exactly the same way even if she had been perfectly alone. It expressed her real feeling towards it, and was not in the least affected. But the moral dignity of it was a little impaired by the fact that in the difficult process of opening the door with both hands occupied, she dropped the extinguisher of her candlestick, which rolled under Eleanor's bed. But the desire to laugh soon faded from Eleanor's mind. Quite possibly there was a ludicrous side to these proceedings, but quite certainly there was another side which without exaggeration might be called tragic; for tragedy exists in comfortable and quiet surroundings as surely as in moments of violent drama and scenes of ruin and disgraceful disclosure. For these misunderstandings and friction between the two were of constant occurrence, and, so far from getting used to them, Eleanor knew that each one left a soreness that was aggravated by their cumulative effect. Two people may often get on each other's nerves, and each find in the other a fruitful source of exasperation, and yet *au fond* to be in accord, but Eleanor was beginning to see that disaccord lay at the root of these continual frictions. Her stepmother, as she was well aware, though she might love her as a Christian, disliked and disapproved of her as a girl; and Eleanor, to the flowering of whose soul affection was as necessary as is sunlight to a growing plant, admitted her own lack of warmth to the elder woman. Nor, as she knew and regretted, was she the only sufferer from this constant inharmoniousness: it distressed and grated on her father as disagreeably as it did on her, making, as it did, a chronic want of ease in the house: there was rooted incompatability, it would appear, between them.

Eleanor gave a little sigh as these depressing reflections mill-wheeled round in her head, and, without attempting to excuse herself for her portion of responsibility in the dis-

turbance, knew, and justly enough, that it was in part, at any rate, her stepmother who created the heinousness of her offences. Eleanor, no doubt, should not have played "La Donna e Mobile" on the church organ, or have laughed in the middle of the reading of "The Christian Year," or have read in bed, or have omitted to say her prayers; but it was Mrs. Ramsden who, by some malignant (though duty-dictated) alchemism, turned such offences into black crimes. She painted them in the colour of mortal sin, and poured out on them vials of denouncement and of discouraging prophecies for Eleanor's future. Affairs were not entirely comfortable.

The scene consequent next morning upon these things was pitched in a rather higher key than usual, for Mrs. Ramsden had refreshed her memory with regard to the play she had found on Eleanor's counterpane, and the occasion seemed to warrant an unsparing vocabulary. The fact that her husband had connived at Eleanor's reading the play was unknown to her, and, with the amicable desire of saving additional unpleasantness, the girl intentionally refrained from mentioning it, and therefore Eleanor, so it was announced by her stepmother, who got rapidly intoxicated with a draught of language that really left the Commination Service faint and colourless, was guilty of most known transgressions. She had no business to take the book at all (how it got into the library Mrs. Ramsden shuddered to inquire, but it should certainly not get there again), and therefore had taken what was not hers, and, having taken it, did not hesitate to wallow in matters unspeakable. She had also been guilty of gross irreverence in laughing at the sacred poem which was read aloud after dinner, and of gross disobedience in reading in bed. Furthermore, she had intentionally deceived Mrs. Ramsden in pretending to be asleep when she was not, and . . .

Eleanor had listened to this with growing indignation. Often her sense of humour came to her aid, and she treasured up the precious sentences in order to reproduce them to herself afterwards by the aid of a portentous gift of mimicry which was hers; but to-day her sense of humour lay completely dormant, while increasing anger made bright her cheeks and eye. And at this point she interrupted, speaking quite quietly.

"I think we have been through all the Ten Commandments now," she said.

Mrs. Ramsden looked at her for one moment in silence, her cold grey eye going stale like a snake's. Then she rose.

"I will ask you to come with me to your father," she said. "I hoped to spare him the pain of hearing all this, but you have made it impossible!"

"Certainly," said Eleanor. "And to spare you the trouble of telling me I have deceived you again, I may say that he knew perfectly well that I was reading that play. I didn't want to bring him into it, but if we are to have it out with him, he would be certain to tell you."

Mrs. Ramsden sat down again.

"That puts a slightly different complexion——" she began.

"No, it does not," said Eleanor hotly. "I took the book from the library, which you want to infer was stealing, and I began to read it before he knew I had it. Are you not coming?"

"Eleanor, I will not be spoken to like that!" said Mrs. Ramsden.

Eleanor had lost her temper with all the completeness with which good-tempered people flare into their infrequent angers.

"Nor will I be spoken to any more as you have chosen to speak to me," she said. "Whether you come with me or not, I shall go to my father. Before you began talking to me you prayed"—this was a fact—"that what you said might bear good fruit. Well, the fruit it has borne is that I am not going to stand it any longer. I shall go to daddy in any case, and tell him all you have said. I shall also ask him to let me go away from here and be a governess. You have often told me I ought to be thinking of earning my living. I quite agree with you. I wish I had done it sooner."

Mrs. Ramsden was not really a bully, and a certain cowardice that possessed her at this moment could not be put down to that. But she had such a passion for what she really considered to be her duty that sometimes she did not quite foresee what awkward positions her duty might lead her into. Indeed, it almost seemed that she might occasionally be mistaken in her idea of her duty. But at present, since Eleanor marched firmly out of the door on her way to her father's study, it was necessary to follow.

He looked up with the worried vacillation of eye that seized him when there was trouble between his wife and daughter, and laid down his pen.

"My dears," he said, "I hope nothing is amiss?"

"Daddy dear, I've something to tell you," said Eleanor.

"I also," said Mrs. Ramsden. "Eleanor, with your permission."

Eleanor shook her head.

"No," she said. "It was I who insisted on coming to daddy. You didn't want to. I am going to speak first."

"Eleanor, I order you——" began Mrs. Ramsden.

"No. Look here, daddy; it was like this——"

Eleanor stated what had happened with great fairness. She reproduced whole sentences of her stepmother's rebukes, and narrated the actual events with absolute accuracy.

"And if you wish to correct my account in any way," she said at the end to her stepmother, "please do so."

Mrs. Ramsden had nothing to correct. She did not like what she had said so much when Eleanor and not she said it, but there was nothing to find fault with in the fidelity of the report. Then came a more difficult passage for Eleanor. She sat down sideways on the arm of her father's chair, not angry any longer, but only sorry. But not one jot of her determination had abated.

"And so, daddy," she said, "I want to go away. Mamma has often told me that I should be thinking of earning my living, and this seems a very good opportunity. We can't go on like this any longer. It makes me sick. You will all be much happier if I go away, and so shall I."

Mrs. Ramsden's face took an added shade of acidity.

"I am glad you had the honesty to add that," she said.

Eleanor shrugged one shoulder.

"There! That explains better than anything I could say," she observed.

Mr. Ramsden turned to his wife.

"My dear, I don't think you quite meant that," he said.

In some curious way Mrs. Ramsden's moral nature supported her detestable remark.

"I meant exactly that, James," she said. "I repeat that I am glad that Eleanor knows she consults her own happiness as well as yours, and perhaps mine. It would be distressing to me if she did not recognize that. But she does, and I am glad. I wish both you and her to know I am glad. Otherwise it would appear that I wished her not to be honest with herself."

"And there again, daddy," said Eleanor.

Mr. Ramsden fidgeted with the paper on the table. All this was acutely distressing to him, but it was his nature (an amiable one) always to wish to find some compromise, some smoothing over of an unpleasant situation, rather than face the situation as it was. He preferred to cover things up, so

that they could not be directly seen : he would always prefer to acquit any individual of blame, and leave blame floating vaguely in the air like mist.

" Well, let us all think it over," he said feebly, " and see if we can't get on without more disputes. There has been a storm—yes, there has been a storm—but storms clear the air, you know. I am sure Eleanor is sorry she read in bed, and that sort of thing, and I am sure, my dear, that all you said to Eleanor was, though perhaps quite true, a little hardly put. Eleanor, I feel certain, has taken your hints to be assertions, and you, my dear, probably put them rather too strongly."

Eleanor put her head on her father's shoulder.

" It won't do, dear daddy," she said. " Mamma and I understand much better than you. I want to go away, and, as I know, the Wilkins' want a governess, as theirs has just left them. I don't think I want to talk about it even. I shall just write to Mrs. Wilkins and ask her if I may come. They are your parishioners, too, and half the time I shall be quite close. Only I want to go."

Eleanor gave a little sigh. She entirely meant to have her way, and knew that, as far as her father was concerned, she would get it, for her will was of so much greater strength than his. He might oppose her, he might put obstacles in the way, but she knew that she would quietly overbear the opposition and remove the obstacles. Then she turned to her stepmother.

" I think that is the best plan," she said.

Mrs. Ramsden seldom invaded the secrets of her own heart. She was content, as a rule, to do her duty, which generally lay somewhere near the surface. For instance, she was completely busy with affairs concerning the children and mothers of her husband's parish, and school-treats and Bands of Hope took up much of any given day, while the interstices were so stuffed with choir-practices and ordering of the household that there was little space in her mind for anything else. It was also the fact, though, perhaps, in a lesser degree, that she set store by her husband's peace of mind, which she was quite aware would be likely to be augmented if she or Eleanor were out of the house. But since nothing short of a coffin would be likely to take her away, she saw the reasonableness of Eleanor going with luggage. In her way she recognized the incompatability of herself and Eleanor, now that it had been finally stated, and volubly accepted it

"I will leave my own feelings entirely out of the question," she said, "and merely consider the wisdom of the conclusion to which Eleanor has come. I may say that I should like not to be interrupted by anybody. My view of the whole matter is this. Probably it is my fault, but whose ever fault it is, Eleanor finds it difficult to live with her family here in peace and contentment. I think I said it was probably my fault; I wish to correct that and say that I am willing to believe that it is entirely my fault, for I do not wish Eleanor to be able to accuse me of want of generosity. Very well, then, it is my fault that Eleanor cannot live with us. Therefore I agree with her that she had better go away, and I am sure there is nowhere she would sooner go to than dear Mrs. Wilkins, and since their park extends almost to the churchyard of St. Peter's, we must none of us think of it as a banishment. I have no doubt whatever that Mrs. Wilkins will take her not only by reason of her own accomplishments—which I never sought to underrate—but from my recommendation, which I will most gladly give. And if ever Eleanor should like to have tea, or lunch, or dinner at this house when she is in her new situation, I for one, whatever anybody else may feel, will be overjoyed to see her, and I hope we'll be able to send her back afterwards in the dogcart, to save her walking home in the dark, if it should be dinner."

Magnanimity could go no further. Eleanor had only to suggest a thing and (irrespective of all Eleanor had previously done) Mrs. Ramsden accepted it, endorsed it, and welcomed it. But the touch about the dogcart, which was quite sincere, crowned it all, for, as everybody perfectly well knew, Mrs. Ramsden often herself walked home in the dark. It was finely felt, and though it might be a pity that she said, "I for one, whatever anybody else may feel, shall be overjoyed to see her," nothing could dim the radiance of the bright thought about the dogcart. She rose haloed with generosity.

"I will write to Mrs. Wilkins before I do anything else," she said. "The house-accounts must be done afterwards. Pray do not wait for me if I am a little late for lunch in consequence, and do not keep anything hot for me."

It was in ways like this that the pathos of her acidity was manifest, for the acidity represented itself to her as self-sacrifice. Congealed gravy and tepid vegetables were things of no consequence: it was far more important that her letter to Mrs. Wilkins and the household books should be finished before lunch. Nor did she let herself think that it might have occurred to Eleanor to offer to help with the household

books, in which case nobody need be late for lunch; she steadily rejected that thought. Very likely Eleanor was busy too, though what she could be busy about was outside the range of Mrs. Ramsden's comprehension. But that was not the point: Eleanor merely did not offer help with household books, and Mrs. Ramsden firmly refused to judge her about it.

Eleanor lingered with her father after Mrs. Ramsden had gone. She guessed very clearly the feelings that lay behind his vague, troubled eyes, and took him with gently shuffling steps to the window, where in silence he fingered the blind-cord, and whistled to himself in an unresonant manner. Eventually she followed him there, and put her arm within his.

"Daddy, it's really best," she said.

He nodded at her.

"Perhaps it is, Nellie," he said, "but it's rather sad if it's best."

"I'm sorry," said she—"most awfully sorry. Daddy, I have tried, I have, indeed, and so of course has mamma, but it is quite certain we don't get on, and it makes everybody wretched."

"But a governess, my dear!" he said. "I thought only young ladies who had no home ever went to be governesses. And I haven't in any way given my consent yet."

"No, dear, but you will," said Eleanor. "Otherwise you had better stop mamma writing to Mrs. Wilkins. You see, it isn't a new idea; we talked about it last spring, do you remember, when—when things of this sort happened before."

Again he stood in silence, and Eleanor easily divined his thoughts. Affection for herself, very strong and tender, she knew was there, and great personal regret at the prospect of her leaving home; there was in his mind also his affection for his wife and his loyalty to her. Affection for his daughter made him want to speak, but as often as he framed words for the thought that loyalty made him dumb. He could not take one side without ranging himself against the other, and in truth he was against neither, but supporter of both. And since, though for divergence of temperament which he infinitely regretted, they were both of one mind about this, his opposition was necessarily feeble.

At length Eleanor spoke.

"Daddy dear, we understand each other quite—quite," she said. "So it must be all right."

He smiled at her.

"But it is sad, Nellie," he said.

CHAPTER IV

ONE morning in November a couple of months later Eleanor was sitting in the very comfortable schoolroom in Mrs. Wilkins' house at the corner of Grosvenor Square. She had been a month in her new situation, and was enjoying it quite immensely. There were certain drawbacks to complete felicity, by far the greatest being her severance from her father, but the balance, it is idle to deny, preponderated in the most solid fashion to the other side.

To begin with, she was conscious that she was growing, not in physical stature, for she was already tall, and did not envy inches, but in all that makes the process of growing so entrancing to the grower, whether he is eighty or eighteen. Horizons were enlarging; the world, as the duckling found out, extended to the end of the next field, and there seemed no reason that there should not be another field beyond. All her life until thirty days ago she had lived pent, not by the physical isolation only of a country parsonage, suburbanly situated in regard to a country town, but in a mental and psychical isolation prescribed by her who was in authority there. All her life she had known bondage to a chilling influence, which was not the less chilling because it was actively philanthropic. It had appeared that men and women were units who should be cast in one particular mould; any divergence from that mould meant that there had somewhere been a mistake, and every mistake had to be corrected. The poor little puppets were stuck back, so to speak, into the cast-iron shape, and faithfully hammered until they filled it. Eleanor had been stuck there too, and the hammerings had been faithfully delivered. Her stepmother, it is needless to explain, had been the Vulcan, her father had stood by, and wondered if so much hammering was necessary. Then, thirty days ago, the warm eager clay had been allowed to escape from the forged shape, and had rolled away downhill (so Vulcan would have considered) into an ampler environment.

It must not be supposed that Eleanor indulged in this imagery, or was even aware of the truth of it, for growing things never think of themselves at all, but only of the delightful fresh vistas that swim into sight. They do not say, "I see fresh things," but "There are fresh things"; the impersonal note is characteristic of growth. Thus Eleanor, sitting in her chair by the fire on this foggy November morning, waiting until Elsie Wilkins had finished the French exercise that had been set her, was not so much conscious that she was enjoying life as that life was enjoyable.

It was more than enjoyable; it was ecstatic. She did not know what was happening (except that Elsie, with her tongue put sideways through her lips, was turning easy English sentences into doubtful French), but it was certainly an enthusiastic affair to be allowed to live. In her, at any rate, there was no lack of enthusiasm; if fault was to be found, there was too much. She bubbled and squirted to any hand that drew the cork. For eighteen years her cork had been inviolate. Now all things pulled at it, and she responded (the cork not quite drawn) in every direction. Her vitality, her power of growth, had been corked and wired down, and though outlets had been given for its expansion, in the orifices of parish work and impossibility of self-expansion, these were not the outlets which it was capable of taking. Her stepmother had presented to her the outlets that she in her girlhood had found to be squirtable through; Eleanor could not diffuse herself through them.

It was in possibility of self-diffusion that she had so enormously gained, by means of the situation she had taken. She daily was getting more and more in touch with the world. Instead of being told that mankind were brothers and sisters (respectable mankind, that is to say), she was beginning to find out for herself that they were. Hitherto she had to be historian to a Sunday-school class, and tell them about Ahasuerus. That did not (her nature being what it was) bring her in contact with them. But when a small news-seller in Piccadilly rushed up to her with "'Orrible murder, miss," she felt more akin to him than the boy who neatly said, "Esther, miss," when Ahasuerus was being inquired into. She met the one on common ground, on a thing that mattered, as a horrible murder does matter, not on Ahasuerus-ground, which did not signify.

This particular incident of the "'orrible murder" had happened only an hour before, when Eleanor had taken her pupil for a walk, and for the moment, as she sat before the fire

while Elsie turned English into French, it diverted her thought. For herself she loved the Ahasuerus story, and the drama and humanity of it, but what she had been obliged to teach in the school was not that, but the names merely. Clapham Junction and Putney would have taken the place of the Biblical names quite perfectly ; it was no question, in the Sunday-school, of human beings, but of the names of the human beings. That seemed (perhaps with the impatience of youth) to be characteristic of her stepmother : she dealt not in people and joy, but in their names, and the difference was as great as that which lies between the mere history of Greece and the sight of the sunset gilding the west front of the Parthenon. Or it was like being told that there was a flower called " odontoglossum," and knowing that it was an orchid, and then suddenly smelling the warm darkness of tropical forests. . . .

This growth and expansion had begun very suddenly in Eleanor, and the occasion for it, no doubt, had been the complete change of environment from the admirable but slightly formal and limited life in the country parsonage to the froth and stir of town. But beyond doubt, also, she was psychically ripe for it, else the mere change of environment would not by itself have produced the expansion. Also, there was another feeling—perhaps the greatest of all—which exercised its force, for while Elsie had her governess, Edward Wilkins, the son, had his tutor. And for some strange reason, a young man, even if he is quite ordinary —which the one in question was not—produces an extraordinary effect on a young and vivid girl, whose life hitherto had been passed in practical isolation from the young males of her species. It is not implied that Eleanor had never set eyes on a young man before, but, entirely speaking, they had hitherto been quite excluded from her life.

The Pygmalion in question, who quite unwittingly up to the present date was having so large a share in bringing Galatea to life, entered the room at this moment. Clearly it was his birthright to arouse interest, though the interest might be one of antagonism. His good looks were too obvious to need comment, and for the most part they were good looks of the manly kind. Robustly framed, he moved with appropriate virile energy, and a face dark-eyed and broad-nosed carried out the general impression of manliness. But the mouth gave pause : it was womanish in its sensitiveness, and much more than womanish in its weakness. The rest of him apparently knew what to do with itself, but the

mouth was already terribly yielding, and might soon be vicious. It could, moreover, be easily conjectured that when it became anything it would become strong in that which it became. At present that which it expressed was a weakness too amiable, perhaps, to be called a weakness at all; many other strong people at least would be the better for a touch of it, and it manifested itself in a charming desire to do what anybody else wanted. Already he and Eleanor had discovered a multitude of traits and tastes in common, and while it would be superfluous to say that they were excellent friends, it would be untrue to imply, however remotely, that the feelings of either for the other was of more fiery colour than that. Only, young men up till now had been the rarest sort of bird in Eleanor's experience.

"Oh, are you busy?" asked this amiable young man, pausing on the edge of the door.

Elsie thought she had thought of the French for "brother-in-law." The interruption made her quite sure that she could think of it no longer.

"Yes, we're busy, Mr. Whittaker," she said. "Oh, and, Miss Ramsden, he ought to tell me what the French for it is, because I was just remembering it, and now, of course, I can't."

"French for what, Elsie?" asked Eleanor.

"Why, 'brother-in-law.'"

"*Beau*——" began Harry Whittaker.

"*Frère*," said Elsie. "There, I've finished. Is it about the Zoo? Because I'm coming, as well as Edward."

"Elsie, dear, it is lesson-time," remarked Eleanor.

"Then why does he come and interrupt?" said Elsie.

"Mrs. Wilkins thought that as it was so foggy——" began the young man.

"Then I shan't do my lessons properly," said Elsie.

"That as it was so foggy," continued Mr. Whittaker, "she would send us all up in the motor."

"Then I'll do my lessons properly," said Elsie. "I thought something else was coming."

"Yes, darling; you spoke much too soon," remarked Eleanor.

"And if we went up now, Miss Ramsden," continued Mr. Whittaker, with exemplary patience, "we might all lunch there, and then she would drive you back to some matinée and let me take the children home. And if you didn't care to go with her——"

"I would go with mummy to the theatre," said Elsie.

"She would take me," said Mr. Whittaker, without drawing breath.

Eleanor's face had brightened at the word "theatre."

"Oh, that would be lovely!" she said.

"Which do you mean?" asked Mr. Whittaker.

Eleanor was quick as a lizard on to this.

"Why, either," she said, still glowing with the thought of the theatre for herself, but equally glowing at the thought of pleasure for him, if he wanted it. "I never heard two nicer plans. Please, will you choose, Mr. Whittaker, which you would like to do?"

"Couldn't choose," said he. "To begin with, it is you to choose, and to go on with, I don't care."

"Oh, are you sure?" asked Eleanor.

"Quite."

"Then I'll go with mummy to the theatre," said Elsie, to solve these unselfish people. "I am quite sure I care."

"Then you'll go to the play, Miss Ramsden," said the young man. "You'll love it. And the motor'll be round in ten minutes."

"That will be lovely," said Eleanor again. "Quick, Elsie! let's get your exercise corrected, and then we will go and get ready. There's a new bear at the Zoo; won't it be nice to see it! Now, then, 'He would not sit down, so we sat down on him.' Read it out."

Harry Whittaker still lingered at the door.

"How frightfully dramatic!" he said. "Wouldn't it make a good curtain?"

"Ne voulant pas s'asseoir," began Elsie. "Oh, there it goes wrong, I think."

"It's gone quite wrong already," said Eleanor.

Mrs. Wilkins, as may be imagined from this indicated position of governess and tutor in the house, was a kind woman. That was true, but it was true also that an obscure sort of snobbishness inspired some of her kindness. Her husband, who was intimately connected with the commoner sorts of crockery, was possessed of great wealth, and she was possessed of a flaming ambition to live the crockery down, and soar upwards to the skies peopled with the stars which she called "Them." With a certain practical sense not always resident in those who are otherwise clever climbers, she realized that stars were not to be reached by star-gazing, but by putting firm ladders in their direction and walking up

them. Why she wanted to get there, and what she expected to find when she did get there, need not concern us; they seemed, perhaps, to shine and be high with nothing else to do but to revolve on their pleasant and spacious orbits. She wanted to have a high and spacious orbit also, and really neglected few opportunities that might lead her towards one. Crockery and the wealth therefrom had no orbit: they were but the lowest rungs of the ladder which led to Them. She neglected no opportunity: indeed, she took care of many things that were not opportunities at all, but which seemed from below to be possibly desirable. How widely this net for opportunities swept may be judged from the fact with which we are immediately concerned—namely, that Harry Whittaker, her boy's tutor, was actually the son of a Lord Grinstead, about whom there was little known, but even with regard to that little ignorance was better. He was certainly quite impecunious—not impecunious in the sense of having to cut down the number of his gardeners, owing to Budget and succession duties, in order to live fatly in two castles, but impecunious in the sense that he lived in a small villa near Twickenham that was chiefly furnished with whisky-bottles which were emptied with incredible rapidity. Yet the son of even this most undesirable old drunkard was a possible opportunity. Harry Whittaker, who, though tutor, always came down to dinner, sometimes referred in a perfectly natural manner to first and second cousins, most of whom belonged to Them, and in these days of climbing there was a subtle and recondite delight in being taken into dinner by her son's tutor, even if there were knights and baronets present. And though Harry Whittaker was a pleasant fellow, it was even more delightful to explain afterwards in the drawing-room who he was, both in rank and occupation. "Edward's tutor, the son of Lord Grinstead," rolled richly on the tongue. In precisely the same way, though in minor degree, the little family feud which had led Eleanor to be Elsie's governess, was a species of small trump, "Daughter of Mr. Ramsden, the vicar of Bracebridge, who married Lord Rolleston's daughter." And Eleanor always came down to dinner too. So far it might be supposed that Mrs. Wilkins was merely a fool. That was not the case, for already several relations of her tutor had dined with her, and, though unsuccessfully, a couple more had been asked to spend a week-end at the house near Bracebridge. Still, these were early days, for the coarse crockery still chinked around the house,

and in the interval she was more thoughtfully kind than a mere fool can possibly be. She was not, that is to say, kind from an indulgent slackness, but actively considerate of the tastes and inclinations of those who were dependent on her, though she might in imagination be so dependent on them. She would in any case have suffered quantities of small personal inconveniences to give Elsie's governess a good time, and often, before leaving the dining-room, told her husband to be sure and pass the wine round before beginning his cigar, as Mr. Whittaker liked a glass of port. In physical respects she was short of stature and capacious, and was still storming the impregnable fact that her hair was turning grey. She made all sorts of marches and counter-marches against this Gibraltar of an enemy's stronghold, so that sometimes it seemed to be black, and occasionally verged on blue. Also, the outer corner of her eyes presented difficulties, and since she could not acquiesce in the pleasant fact of thirty-nine, her manœuvres in these districts made her appear more. The conclusion in the minds of quite kind-minded people was that there must be more to conceal than was really the case. Yet, somehow, her little follies and absurdities were of an endearing nature, for, being quite harmless, they merely testified to her undeniable humanity. For, when all is said and done in the matter of high ideals, we love people, not because they are angels, but because they are men and women.

She and Eleanor, after lunching with the children and Mr. Whittaker at the Zoological Gardens, got to the theatre some ten minutes before the performance began, and Mrs. Wilkins was pleasantly voluble.

"So here we are, Miss Ramsden," she said, "right in the middle, so as we shall see what's said and done. I'm in a terror always of arriving late, and not being able to understand what it's all about, from having missed the beginning. What a lunch we had, to be sure! Sandwiches and ginger-beer, and nuts and buns, though I hope Mr. Whittaker went and got a drop of something comfortable, as I told him to, to settle it. But it's a treat to the children to have a lunch like that instead of their good food at home, and, as Elsie said, it's like being elephants and monkeys ourselves. And now, my dear, give me a programme, and let me get the names of the characters by heart before they begin, and I shall have more chance of understanding it. And while I do that, you might take a glance round the theatre and see if there's any

of your stepmamma's relations here ; and if there is, be sure to smile and nod at them. Why, if it isn't Mr. Louis Grey, who's being Lord Comber. What a name for himself that young man is making, and he's not thirty yet. They say he's to take a theatre of his own next spring, and give us ' Romeo and Hamlet ' all over again."

Eleanor, to use a cant phrase, was no judge of a play, because the very fact that it was a play meant so much to her. She had, in any case, the dramatic temperament, and loved with an intimate fervour the representation of any story. She lost the sense of self altogether ; she lost even the critical sense as to whether the story was good or the development natural. She only knew that this hour or two showed some sort of drama. Afterwards she was capable of acute criticism, but while the affair was on the boards she just followed it, eagerly breathless to see what happened there next, not pausing in thought to tell herself that it happened awkwardly, or should never have happened at all. Between the acts, when Mrs. Wilkins would privately have preferred that she should look round to see if anybody she knew had come in, she was incapable of such mundane distraction, and could only think of the possible developments which would take place when the curtain again made its celestial ascent. But as the play went on, it was Mrs. Wilkins who ceased to think so much of the audience, and wondered whether the Honourable Mrs. Ramsden would have quite liked her stepdaughter to be so profoundly interested. She need not have wondered, for there was no doubt that Mrs. Ramsden would not have liked it at all, either in respect of herself or her stepdaughter, or any other earnest Christian. Yet somehow, when the curtain went down on the third act, there was an innocence of interest in Eleanor that was inviolable. Mrs. Wilkins certainly saw a very deplorable social situation, without doubt seeing rightly, and meditated retreat before the last act. But Eleanor, it was perfectly plain, saw only an intense dramatic interest.

" Oh, poor things !" she said softly, as the lights started into luminance again. " Isn't it dreadful for them ? I suppose she wasn't really married—in church, I mean—at all. And as they weren't married in church, is it that there is something funny about the children ? I don't quite understand that. But if Lord Comber only says what has happened, it will be all right. I love Lord Comber. He was so sorry about the dog, too."

There was an innocence about this that could not be sullied, a fact which Mrs. Wilkins reflected in her decision to stop. Certainly Eleanor would wonder why they left at so entrancing a crisis in the drama, and so Mrs. Wilkins thought —not unwisely—it was far better for her to see the play, since such was the untarnishable quality of her mind, than to risk the possible tarnish that her wonder why she was taken away might produce. So they remained on through the wonderful fourth act, in which to any who was not on the alert for what the prude considers "horrid" a miracle of tenderness and human pity was unveiled. There was something of the glory of sunset in the serene and tragic close; though it was sad with the sorrow of inevitable things, it was beautiful with the nobility of a great-hearted sufferer. And as the lights illumined the great dark cave of the theatre again, Eleanor turned to Mrs. Wilkins, with overflowed eyes.

"But how beautiful!" she said. "And—and God will make them understand, won't He?"

Then, in answer to the general thunder, the curtain drew up again, according to the recognized and execrable custom, and revealed the resuscitated hero. Eleanor looked at him with amazement.

"But Lord Comber is dead!" she cried indignantly.

Then, and not till then, did she emerge from the atmosphere of the play she had seen, and was aware that Mr. Louis Grey was standing there.

"Oh, how happy he must be!" she said. "Just fancy being able to do that. I think great actors must be the happiest people in the world. Wasn't he splendid?"

It was already dark when they got out, unfortunately without encounter of any of Eleanor's step-relations, and they drove down the lit and crowded streets, with many blocks and pauses, for the fog was beginning to close in again, making opals of the electric lighting. As she returned to herself, Eleanor felt that the actual world in which she lived—she and Mrs. Wilkins, and her pupil, and all those she knew and cared for—were far less real than the world, compressed into three hours, in which she had been lost and absorbed. That mimic world seemed to her a condensation and distillation of life; she who had looked was more keenly herself then than now; Mr. Louis Grey as he appeared before the updrawn curtain was not so acutely real as Lord Comber had been; a collision with a mid-street island and a crashing capsize of their motor would be on a less vivid plane of existence than that which she

had just quitted; the events of the brain were more salient than any material catastrophe that could happen to the body. A month or two ago, when she had read "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," she had felt the same thing, though in a vastly minor degree; now all she had felt then was sublimated, made essence. Mere men and women, actors and actresses, had had power to lift life to a more poignant level, and what was possible for them was possible for others. The theatre seemed to her the real thing: thus in a fine play finely acted she found the quintessence of existence. All other distractions that assailed in the ordinary world were ruled out; the plan, the idea, marched to its consummation. There was nothing in the world so worthy of life as the responsibilities of life, purged of its undramatic interludes. All of real life worth remembering was moments, disconnected and interrupted; the moments but touched each other like a string of pearls. There, in the truer world of the theatre, the disconnection and interruptions were expunged. Tragic or comic, it went on to its crisis, and stopped.

She lay long awake that night, immeasurably excited, and more than once got up, with her ideal already found and niched, and, turning on the light, looked at herself in the big wardrobe-mirror, each time rejecting her image with despair, yet each time weaving dreams in the darkness, investing herself with the charm that she could not see in the glass. For she could so easily imagine herself in the centre of the stage, the dark cave of the house all crammed with eager ears to hear her, all alight with eager eyes, like glow-worms in the gloom, to see her. It was a pity, so she thought to herself, that she was so plain but—until again she turned up the light for another honest scrutiny—perhaps her face was not so repulsive as to make fiasco of all she felt, and felt that she could convey. For moment by moment in these hours of the night there was being instilled into her that final and quintessential emotion that marks the difference between the amateur and the artist. Hitherto she had known only that intensity of feeling which is common to both alike; now there was beginning to stir within her that instinctive necessity for expression of emotion that marks out the artist from the rest of the art-loving crowd. Often—usually, indeed—the expression is lame and imperfect, and for that reason the world is flooded with bad artists of all kinds, while those to whom the absolute need for expression has not come produce voluminious work, and again the world of art is in spate with torrents of work that is altogether belonging to the excited

waters of amateurishness. But those to whom the sting of emotion has come, and to whom has come to imperative need for its expression, pass into the ranks of artists, bad or good. But the worst is Aldebaran-distant from the little moon, sometimes brilliant, sometimes eclipsed of the amateur who feels as keenly as Leonardo, but produces only to fill idle hours or any empty purse. And that curious self-conscious night that Eleanor passed, in despairing moments when she saw the faithful reflection of a face that was not beautiful in the inexorable looking-glass, and in recuperative moments when she lay in the darkness and heard the traffic outside die into silence, and revive again into tired life before the late dawning of the November day, was the coming-of-age, so to speak, of her nature. It was as if a family lawyer had told her how vast were the estates that she was bound to claim, and in the same breath, when she saw her pale face in the glass, warned her how crushing were the succession duties. Then, when the room began to flicker with the return of the fog-bedraggled light of dawn, she fell from waking into a doze, and from doze into sleep, and dreamed vaguely and unvividly that she was standing in the centre of a huge dark stage, waiting for the lights to go up. Behind the wings of one side, unable to come on till she gave him the cue, was Louis Grey; behind the wings on the other was Harry Whittaker, also dependent on her speech. Somewhere in the same shrouded darkness was her stepmother, reading the poem in "The Christian Year" for the Churching of Women. The evasive horror of nightmare brooded over this farcical hash of memory, but no crash and struggle of awakening succeeded. She passed into clean, recuperative sleep.

A couple of weeks passed in days that were still not quite routine to Eleanor, so vivid was the lapse of hours to one accustomed to the stagnation of Bracebridge. The same days passed to her stepmother, no doubt, without any sense of stagnation, because the Guild of St. Mark, and the Sewing Bee, and the practice for Christmas carols, in which again the works of Uncle Evelyn were to the fore, and the resignation of a trusted churchwarden, and the fact that her own gardener had joined the Methodists (which was full of dark and unintelligible consternation), were the things that happened to suit her emotions. She wrote to Eleanor every week, describing this whirl of events, and hoping that she was not losing sight of the real world in the superficial gaieties of town. Eleanor found it difficult to satisfy Mrs. Ramsden's

obvious misgivings in these respects, and took refuge in her replies by writing about the industry of Elsie, the nave of Westminster Abbey, and the music at St. Paul's. Elsie, also —this was a true though brilliant after-thought—was learning Psalms by heart. She learned two verses every morning, and every morning said them as well as all the old verses she had learned before. But these difficult epistles did not say anything real about herself, nor could they possibly do so, since they had to be framed with regard to the recipient, and between recipient and sender there was nothing vital in common. Mrs. Ramsden, on receipt of each, read it, sighed, and docketed it with Eleanor's initials and the date. They then reposed in a drawer of correspondence labelled "Family." Once Eleanor had said: "Mr. Whittaker is writing a play, and he read me some of it. It is quite beautifully written, and he is going to send it to Mr. Louis Grey when it is finished." The docket on this contained the addition, "? Mr. Whittaker."

Eleanor's letters to her father were of a far more informing kind. Early in December the following made its appearance at Bracebridge:

"Oh, daddy dear, I am having such a nice time, and Mrs. Wilkins is as kind as she can be, and so is Mr., only, as you know, he is usually silent, and eats more than anybody I ever saw. He goes to Marienbad, you know, for a month every summer, and if he does that, he can go on eating till the next year. Aren't people funny? But he is so kind, and he took me to a Queen's Hall concert the other night, and went to sleep instantly. And Elsie is tremendously quick at her lessons, whenever there is something to be done when she has finished, which there usually is.

"Daddy dear, isn't it ripping? We are coming down to Bracebridge for Christmas, and are going to stop a month or so. I shall see you every day the whole time, as it will be holidays. And Mr. Whittaker, who is writing a quite serious play, is writing another sort of fairy-story play, which he, and Edward, and Elsie, and I are going to act. You must come to that, and I'm going to be the old witch, who bursts at the end, and then everything is happy. I burst off the stage, you know, and it's really a large paper bag, and my broomstick falls on to it (the stage), and so there's the end of me. Some parts are *too* pathetic, especially when I heat an enormous caldron to boil Elsie and Edward in, and have them for dinner. They are rescued just in time by the

hunchback, who is really the fairy prince, and Mr. Whittaker, so what we want is the fairy princess, and will Alice be it? She's got very little to say, and only has to look lovely. Mr. Whittaker acts beautifully, too, and we're having rehearsals in the schoolroom after tea. The frightfully exciting thing is that Mr. Louis Grey is going to stay with us for Christmas, and so we shall have to act before him. I hope he won't shriek with laughter in the wrong place, but I don't think it's likely, as the pathetic parts are really pathetic, and the funny ones quite dreadfully funny.

"Oh, and how are you? I do hope you are tremendously well and happy, like me. I can't tell you how lovely it will be to see you again, and may we go for a walk together on Christmas Eve, just when it begins to get dark, so that we come back to the front-door when it's quite dark, and see the light shining cosily through the red blinds? We've done that so often on Christmas Eves. Then perhaps I might stop and have dinner with you that night, for I know Mrs. Wilkins will allow me, if it's convenient to mamma. But please don't suggest it if you think she would find it a nuisance. Will you be tremendously clever about it, and find out what she really feels? I know she would say 'Yes' if you asked her straight, but I should like it so much best if I thought she wanted me to come. But very likely she will be very busy that evening with choir-practice and all sorts of things, and it mightn't be convenient. I only want to come if it is, but if it is, I should just love it, especially the walk. Isn't it dramatic, coming out of the cold and the dark into the light through the red blinds and home? Because it is home, though I'm ever so happy. Mr. Whittaker is going to put in a scene about the two children coming to their home in the dark like that, but when the door is opened, it's the witch. It is almost too dreadful, but I can't help being proud, because I suggested it. I'm making his dress—at least, some of it. He's a hunchback most of the time, with a dreadful false nose. Then when I burst, he throws off his cloak with the hump in it, and looks too lovely in a blue tunic and tights, don't they call them? That part is what he wore once at a fancy-dress ball. I'm sewing the hump into the cloak and making the cloak. It's so late: I had no idea.

"Your most loving

"NELLIE.

"P.S.—Please tell me about Christmas Eve, and whether Alice will be the fairy princess. Good-night, darling daddy."

These voluminous sheets, covered with Eleanor's sprawling handwriting, arrived a little before breakfast-time at the Vicarage. Mrs. Ramsden was always down first, appearing punctually at a quarter-past eight, in time to see that the urn was boiling properly, and to sort the post, opening the daily paper, and airing it at the fire. She had made up a legend (so long ago that it had acquired the dignity of folklore) that her husband always liked to read the paper first, and thus, though she aired it, she never glanced at it. In consequence to read aloud to her at breakfast all the pieces that he thought she would like to hear about, which saved her a great deal of trouble, since she was beginning to find small print difficult, though she could see a school-child not attending to the Psalms across half a mile of pews. On this particular morning there were several important communications for herself, including extra copies of Uncle Evelyn's Christmas carol, for the use of the augmented choir, which meant that the choir that could sing more or less was swelled by many who could not. These extra copies were sent her free of charge by the Reverend the Viscount, for there were bales of Uncle Evelyn's compositions at his house, and he was glad to get rid of them for a good purpose. There was a weighty packet, also, containing G.F.S. (Girls' Friendly Society) leaflets, a picture postcard from Eleanor, with a "view" of Ludgate Hill and the dome of St. Paul's at the top; but that was all. On the other hand, there was a great thick letter for her husband directed in Eleanor's handwriting, which Mrs. Ramsden could not help seeing, especially since she looked at it. So she was quite ready when her husband came down, a little later. Alice was five minutes late, and was promptly fined the sum of one penny, to be given to the poor-box, since at the Vicarage everybody was fined if late for breakfast, since that postponed prayers and inconvenienced the household. Mrs. Ramsden always paid her fine instantly when she was late, which occurred once in four or five years. Her husband paid sevenpence a week to the poor-box, and had always finished his breakfast before anybody else, even though he read the paper aloud most of the time.

He propped it up as usual against the toast-rack, and then saw his letter from Eleanor, which he opened.

"What a dreadful hand Nellie writes!" he said. "But she is so bursting with news that the first paragraph is always the most illegible!"

"Eleanor sent me a picture postcard," said Mrs. Ramsden.

"It was very kind of her, since it is one of my favourite views in London—St. Paul's from the bottom of Ludgate Hill. It is coloured."

"Indeed, my dear! They are all coming down for Christmas. Yes . . . yes. They are going to act a play. Eleanor is going to be the witch."

He read in silence for some time.

"And wonders whether Alice will be the fairy princess. Yes. The paper, now. A new aeroplane flight from Ostend to Dover. That would not interest you, my dear."

Mrs. Ramsden chipped a piece of bacon high into the air, and Alice came in.

"Is the case defended, darling?" asked Mrs. Ramsden, in the appointed formula.

"Oh no! General sleepiness. Good morning, dad."

"Good-morning, Alice. I was late too. Eleanor wants to know if you will act the fairy princess in a play they are doing at Christmas."

"That is more a question for me, dear James," said Mrs. Ramsden. "I should require to see the speeches Alice has to make first, and to know to whom they are made."

Mr. Ramsden referred again to the letter.

"She doesn't have to say much," he said; "she only has to look lovely."

"I suppose if Alice did not take the part that Eleanor would," remarked Mrs. Ramsden. "Perhaps it would be kinder to Eleanor if Alice took it. If they are going to give a play, I am sure we all wish that it should go as well as possible. I am sure I have no objection to acting in itself, and indeed I once acted in a play, or rather quite a little opera that papa and Uncle Evelyn wrote together. It was acted in the Parish Room at home, and the proceeds were to go to the S.P.C.K. Unfortunately, when all expenses were paid, there was a deficit instead."

"I hope that did not go to the S.P.C.K.," remarked her husband, with some levity.

Alice opened her mouth to laugh, but changed her intention into a cough.

"I should like to act the fairy princess, mamma," she said.

"That depends, my dear. One must know a little more about the play first. I hope we shall see something of Eleanor, James. But she seems to be so much taken up with different pleasures that I should not be surprised if we

scarcely set eyes on her. Probably in contrast to all the gaieties going at Mrs. Wilkins' we shall seem very dull to her."

This seemed a favourable opportunity.

"Nellie is quite as anxious to come as we are to see her, my dear," said he. "She and I will go for a walk together on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, as we have done for years past, and it would be nice, would it not, if she spent the evening with us? We can send her back in the pony-carriage after dinner."

Mrs. Ramsden folded her napkin with an air of quiet and sublime resignation.

"Of course, if you wish it, James," she said, "it shall be done. But if there is one evening of the year when we are all at our wit's end with work, it is Christmas Eve. There are the decorations of the church"—Mrs. Ramsden marked them off on the fingers of her left hand with the bony thumb of her right hand. "There are the decorations for the house. There is the final choir-practice. There are our little family presents. There is the Christmas-tree for the school-children to be decked. And if there is one evening in the year when Beringer expects to be allowed to go home and spend it with his wife, that evening is the twenty-fourth of December."

This was a little too strong even for Mr. Ramsden's peaceful spirit.

"My dear, out of the three hundred and sixty-five evenings in the year we use the carriage perhaps five times. Beringer gets home by sunset at least three hundred and sixty times. But as Christmas Eve does not seem to you suitable, I will tell Nellie to come some other evening."

Mrs. Ramsden unfolded her napkin again. Figuratively this implied a reopening of the subject.

"Thank you, James," she said. "I am glad you have told me that it was Eleanor's idea to come on Christmas Eve. I thought it was a suggestion of yours, and that any other evening would do as well. But sooner than that Eleanor should think that she is not welcome whenever she suggests herself I would sit up the whole of the night after she had gone to get everything ready. And if Beringer hopes to have his Christmas Eve at home, I must tell him that it will not be possible. He has had his Christmas Eve at home ever since he came to us, and I am sure he ought not to mind going out for once. Alice, if you have finished your breakfast, you can go."

Alice got up.

"And I should like to be the fairy princess," she remarked as she left the room.

The removal of Alice was a manœuvre. Mr. Ramsden quite understood that.

"Well, my dear?" he said, as the door closed.

Mrs. Ramsden got up.

"James," she said, "I fancy that you have in your mind some idea that you do not give words to. Pray let me know what it is. If it is in any way critical of my conduct or attitude, I ask you all the more to tell me. I can never be so busy as not to wish for every opportunity of encouragement in self-improvement. Pray tell me, James."

Mr. Ramsden gave a little sigh. It was an instinctive, not an intentional, sigh, but his wife perceived it.

"I am afraid that I worry you," she said, "but if you have anything, as I said, on your mind, critical of me, I ask you to tell me."

"It was only that you did not seem very cordial about Eleanor's coming here," he said.

Mrs. Ramsden pursed her lips up and put her finger to her forehead.

"Thank you, James," she said. "Now let us recollect. I began by saying that I hoped we should see a great deal of Eleanor, did I not? Yes. Then I think—correct me if I am wrong—I think you suggested she should come here to dine on Christmas Eve, and I said, which was perfectly true, that we should be very busy and that Beringer always has his Christmas Eve at home. Then, surely, the moment you told me that the suggestion was Eleanor's, did I not welcome it? I meant to, anyhow. Perhaps I did not sufficiently convey my meaning. I am sure, indeed, that I could not have, since you thought me lacking in cordiality. Thank you for telling me. I will write to Eleanor myself; if I cannot manage to squeeze it in this morning, I will certainly do so directly after lunch—no, I cannot then but in time to catch the afternoon post. Or if I miss that I will telegraph. Yes, I will write or telegraph to Eleanor saying how delighted I am that she can spare us that evening, and that Beringer shall drive her back."

Mr. Ramsden smiled at her, with a slight look of confusion and regret in his kind eyes. He felt somehow put in the wrong, and he did not quite know how it had happened.

"I am sure Eleanor would be delighted if you sent her a line to say how welcome she would be," he said.

Mrs. Ramsden heaved a long, intentional sigh.

"That is all right, then," she said. "Dear me, it is already half-past nine. But it was, oh, so well worth while to clear that up. I will write, or, as I say, if I cannot find ten minutes, I will telegraph. I quite see how important it is that Eleanor should feel that we are all eager to see her. And if Mrs. Wilkins can assure me that there is nothing in their little play which is undesirable, I will let Alice act the fairy princess without any more question. Nobody hates the carping and distrustful attitude so much as I. And now, dear James, if I shall not disturb you, I will try over Uncle Evelyn's Christmas carol on the drawing-room piano. But if you are working next door, and it would distract you, I will go to my bedroom. I have to sing the alto part, which is not quite easy, and I must practise it. *Should* I disturb you at the drawing-room piano? I could really practise it in my bedroom quite well if I came down to strike a note now and then."

"My dear, you never disturb me," said he

CHAPTER V

DUSK was fading fast into night, and a wonderful transparent twilight lay over the snow-covered earth. High up on the rolling stretches of the down, the sky, of the toneless dove colour that ushers in the approach both of night and morning, appeared of gigantic size; the fact of the earth swimming in space seemed to be made visibly true. To east, south, and north of that great circle of air a multitude of stars burned with the exceeding clearness of frost; the west alone was still unpunctuated by their golden fires, for something of sunset still lingered in the band of pale green sky, and in the level bars of fading crimson that made islands there. Here on these upland expanses the snow lay virgin and unstained, reflecting all the tones of the sky; below, like a smouldering furnace, the lights and smoke of Bracebridge filled the hollow in which it stood with pleasant suggestions of warmth and shelter. It was very good, so thought Eleanor as she and her father returned from their Christmas Eve walk, to be out in this cold austerity of the downs and the windless frost, especially since firelight and drawn curtains would welcome their home-coming. But there was still a mile of crisp snow in front of them, and they kept to the heights till they should have passed Bracebridge, and arrived at the steep descent just above the church and the Vicarage.

Eleanor was in an outdoor Epicurean mood; she was tasting with gusto all the pleasures that were heaped round her, and, while appreciating them, wondered if by ill-luck she was missing any.

"Daddy, I think we chose right," she said, "to keep up on the downs, and not walk through Bracebridge. Of course there are the gas-flares and the holly and turkeys in the windows and the blazing toy-shops, but if we had done that we should have missed the contrast. As it is, we shall come straight in from the cold and the emptiness, and see the light shining through the red blinds suddenly when we turn the corner in the garden. And then there will be tea, and then I shall try to help mamma with something, and then dinner."

"Dinner will follow remarkably soon after tea, my dear," remarked her father. "We have managed to be extremely late."

Eleanor gave a great contented sigh.

"I know," she said, "and it has been nice. You see, if we had been back earlier, we should not have seen the night come on out of doors, which was part of the plan. I expect mamma and Alice will have had tea, so perhaps you and I might have ours by the study fire. Wouldn't that be rather cosy? Daddy dear, you must go first down this steep piece, and stamp your great big feet well into the snow, please, like good King Wenceslas, and I shall step in the holes, like the page. Oh, how glad I am to be going home!"

Mr. Ramsden obligingly played the part of the King, and they went down the headlong path into the main road in file. Then, when they came on to level ground again, Eleanor took her father's arm.

"I, too, am glad," he said. "But, Nellie, you are very happy, are you not, with Mrs. Wilkins?"

"Yes, tremendously happy," said the girl, with decision, "and interested and full of plans. But that's no reason why I shouldn't have a little inmost place in my heart for you, daddy."

"You must tell me about the plans," said he. "And tell me this, too. You feel it was a good plan that you went away?"

Eleanor was silent for a moment. When she spoke there was that wonderful tenderness in her voice that in later years made those who heard it feel the tears rise to their eyes.

"Yes, dear," she said, "it was an excellent plan, though once—do you remember?—you said it was sad that I should think of it. But if it is sad, it is also quite natural. I belong to you—oh, most tremendously!—but then, other people belong to you, and . . . Daddy, will you answer me one little tiny question quite straight? I know you will. Well, isn't it happier at home, too, although I know—oh, I know you miss me!—than it was before?"

He pressed her hand, which lay in the crook of his arm, a little closer to him.

"Yes, Nellie, it is," he said.

"Oh, I am glad! I hoped it was so, and I knew it must be. You see, mamma and I always did rub each other up the wrong way, and I expect it was quite entirely my fault. But then I'm made so differently to her, more than usually differently. I felt that for a long time before last autumn, and, daddy dear, I used to worry over it frightfully, because it

must have been so beastly for you. And then, the moment after I had worried, you know, and made up my mind to be more careful and thoughtful, I always went and did something perfectly dreadful. And now will you give me just one kiss, to show that everything is as right as right ?"

She lifted up her face that was so quickly moved to sadness or merriment to his. The moon had risen and shone with the keen whiteness of clear frosty air, brightly illuminating it, and for the space of a moment's illusion it looked to him somehow like the face of his wife come back. All the gay, sensitive childishness was there, the eager affection, the simplicity. Then that moment's illusion vanished, and he saw a little beneath—saw the tenderness, the womanliness. He laid his hands on her shoulders, much moved.

" My dearest Nell !" he said. " You don't know how dear ! And promise me one thing : that you will never cease coming back to me, in sorrow and joy alike, and trouble and pleasure. I think I shall always understand. God bless you, dear."

A couple of dozen steps, taken in silence, brought them into the Vicarage gardens in sight of the red-glowing blinds, and even as they stood on the step, knocking the caked snow from their boots, the door was thrown brightly open by Mrs. Ramsden, and the plan of the cosy tea by the study fire vanished into the realms of the thwarted ideas.

" I was waiting to hear your steps," she said, " and the moment I heard them I rang the bell for the urn to be brought up. I was determined that you and Eleanor should have hot, fresh tea. You are a little late, but that does not signify in the slightest, and I hope you have had a pleasant walk."

" I'm afraid we're more than a little late, mamma," said Eleanor.

" Pray do not think of that, Eleanor," said her stepmother. " I beg you will let no thought of the kind interfere with your enjoyment. To be sure Alice wanted me to have tea up, and said that you and your father could have tea in the study, so that she and I could get to work on the Christmas-tree without waiting, but I would not hear of it. I was determined we should all have tea together. Besides, I could not put the servants to extra trouble this evening. And if you wish to change your boots, you will find everything laid out from the bag you brought in your old room. There is a fire there. Parkins asked me if she should light it, and I said, ' Of course.' "

Here was thoughtfulness, bright and shining and welcoming, and as cold as the pale flame of the moon. It was, indeed, as if the moon spoke to homeless wanderers, and said: "Warm yourselves in my beams, and be quite comfortable." A couple of dry twigs burning with real fire would have been so much more to the point. And yet, though this effusion was quite useless for warming purposes, Eleanor felt vaguely guilty that it lit no glow in her. But she tried to make her voice sound warm.

"Oh, that *is* kind of you, mamma," she said. "I will run up and change my boots and be down again at once, though I know I shall feel inclined to sit in front of my fire upstairs."

Mrs. Ramsden was terribly alert.

"Would you like your tea there, Eleanor?" she asked. "I will bring it up with pleasure."

"Oh no, no!" cried Eleanor. "I only meant it was so kind of you—so kind. . . ."

The sentence would not finish itself, and she ran upstairs, leaving her father below. Mrs. Ramsden waited for the sound of her closing bedroom door.

"I think," she said—"I think I left nothing undone that could make Eleanor feel welcome and at home. If there is anything else, James, please tell me."

This warmless radiance chilled Mr. Ramsden also.

"I am sure, my dear, you have done all that is kind," he said.

His wife gave a long, aspirated sigh.

"Thank you, James," she said. "I was afraid I might have omitted something. And there are meringues for dinner. Alice remembered that. Eleanor likes them, so I ordered them at once. We shall have the apple-tart cold to-morrow. I do not eat meringues myself."

"Then let us have apple-tart and meringues, dear," said her husband. "There is no reason why you should not have your pudding because you are so thoughtful for Eleanor."

"But it was Alice who remembered she liked meringues," said Mrs. Ramsden, who, if she prided herself at all, took satisfaction in the inflexible honesty that gave others their full due.

Mrs. Ramsden hurried away as soon as she had finished tea, asking Eleanor to excuse her, and would not hear of the girl helping her.

"I shall be able to get through everything," she said, "if

you will let me run away directly after dinner. I do not in the least mind sitting up and working for an extra half-hour or so, and I want Christmas Eve to be as great a holiday as I can for everybody else. So pray, dear Eleanor, sit with your father, and make yourself quite comfortable and leisurely. And you must not think of me as being unduly pressed. I like being occupied; I revel in employment. One ought to be so thankful, and I hope I am, for the opportunities to do things for other people. Alice likes it, too. Alice, if you will bring the copies of the carols, and the candles for the Christmas-tree, and the shawls for the old people, and that little box of toys for the children, we shall both have our hands full."

And as she went out of the door, with her hands, to do her justice, quite full, she hummed the first line of "The First Noel," to show that the spirit of Christmas filled her mind, as did the presents of Christmas her hands.

Mr. Ramsden shuffled about the room after she had left, with the particular awkwardness that implied a disquieted mind. Eleanor, used to these peregrinations and covertly interpreting them, turned an anxious face to him.

"Wouldn't mamma let me help her?" she asked. "Can't I—can't I do anything to make her feel I want to help her?"

He shuffled silently for a while, by degrees finding his matches and a pipe. Then a sudden decision came to him.

"No, Nellie," he said. "It is quite a good thing to take people at their word. We will sit here, and have a good talk. Now, my dear, you said you were full of plans. I want to hear all about them. I want to know all that interests you."

Eleanor laughed.

"Oh, daddy, it's most of it so trivial! It is pure babble."

"That's where you make your mistake, Nellie," said he. "There's nothing trivial about the people you love."

Eleanor gave a little wriggle of appreciation, and pulled him down into the big basket-chair before the fire, occupying the arm of it.

"Oh, daddy, you wise old man!" she said. "You always say the things I feel. Of course, now you say it, I could have told you long ago that there is nothing trivial if you love the person to whom it happens. I wish you would always be trivial when you write to me; I want to know if your pipe after breakfast tasted good, and if you enjoyed your lunch; and if you felt well when you walked out afterwards; and if you took off your boots when you came in because they were wet; and if you sat in the study or in this dreadful

drawing-room. Oh dear, I don't mean dreadful at all; but you know this room isn't you, in the same way as the study is you. You keep such funny little odds and ends in the study: photographs, all faded, and all sorts of bits of things."

Mr. Ramsden considered this speech, and apparently passed it. At any rate, his answer implied acquiescence.

"It's just that which I want to know about you," he said.

"Darling daddy, I always write to you all that," said Eleanor.

"Yes, but you don't write what lies behind it. Why don't you? You say you have been to the theatre, or that Mr. Whittaker is writing a play——"

"Oh, Mr. Whittaker!" said she.

"Yes."

Eleanor leaned a little forward, and gently rubbed her forehead on the shoulder of his coat.

"He is delightful," said Eleanor frankly, "and we really are great friends. It helps, doesn't it, when two people like the same things? The theatre, for instance. You see, we are both absolutely mad about acting. Oh, how wonderful it must be to be able to hold people as an actor does! Daddy, have you ever seen Mr. Louis Grey act? Mrs. Wilkins took me the other day to 'Wayfarers.' Oh, I'm in such a panic about our play, because, you see, he'll be there. He comes to-night, and stops a whole week. Or do you think he will be sick of the thought of acting, and not come to our play?"

"My dear, I don't know," said her father. "I should think it was quite possible. You won't be in such a fright then."

Eleanor considered this.

"Oh no, not nearly," she said, with a somewhat fallen face.

"But the fact is you would sooner be in a fright and have Mr. Grey there than be quite comfortable with Mr. Grey not there," he remarked.

Eleanor laughed.

"Oh, a million times sooner," she said. "Just fancy if Mr. Grey was amused (in the right place, of course, I mean), or if he was anxious when the caldron was being got ready for Elsie and Edward."

"And instantly offered you an engagement at a thousand pounds a night," said her father.

"And asked Mr. Whittaker to write him a play to do in town, daddy; wouldn't it be lovely! Oh, you're making fun of me. But usen't you to be silly when you were a boy, making up the most wonderful things in your mind, knowing they were quite silly really, but still making them up, and pretending so hard that they were possible, that they became quite real to you?"

He leaned forward, looking into the fire. Somehow, Eleanor's return to him, and their long walk together, had made him feel more himself than he had done during the weeks of their separation. Busy, and full, and happy as the days had been, they seemed now to him to have been crusted over, so that some inner self, which was his most essential self, had been confined and isolated. Now it breathed the air again and looked on the sun.

"Ah, yes, my dear," he said. "I did a lot of castle-building, and the walls of the castle were gold and glass, and the flags flew from every turret."

"Oh, daddy, and what has happened to them?" asked Eleanor, with concern in her voice, completely forgetting her own castles in the thought of his vanished ones. She knew instinctively that they had vanished, or but twinkled remotely on a horizon from which he had travelled far.

"My dear, only that has happened to them which always happens," he said. "They get beaten upon by the grey weather of life and the winds of time, and they get a little dulled outside and a little draughty within.

"Oh daddy!" said Eleanor again, with a little quaver in her voice.

"No, my dear, it isn't sad," said he. "We begin to learn that we must build a house instead which we can live in, and will withstand the weather. And it is made of finer things, dear Nell, than those romantic and golden walls. It is made of faith, and patience, and love, and affection, and kindliness. It takes a very long time building, and it is never finished. But we've got to go on building just the same. Pieces fall down, and the slates come off; but there are always materials to hand for repairing it. Whereas in the case of our castles we can't get more materials; we have used them all when we are young."

Eleanor leaned forward.

"Go on, daddy," she said. "It's getting happier. And can't you use up the materials of your castle in your other house, just for decoration?"

"Yes, dear, if you like," said he. "Or you may do what I have done. In the garden of my other house, behind the trees, there stands what is left of my castle. It isn't habitable, but it still shines."

"Oh, daddy, show it me some time!" said the girl.

"Yes, dear; you are always there, you know."

Eleanor thought for a moment with quickened breathing.

"Is it in Italy?" she asked gently.

The two had gone into the study, where they talked and shared the big arm-chair there on the hearthrug, guided there only by the light of the fire that gleamed and prospered on the hearth. Since then the flames of it had been quieted down into the steadfast red shining of glowing coal, so that, though the fire was still genuine and friendly, it was less demonstrative. Thus they spoke now, father and daughter, with the intimacy that is characteristic of twilight talking, when faces are blurred and physical presence obliterated. In that visual obliteration the ear is quickened, and it seemed to Eleanor that her father's voice had never sounded quite like that; the tone was more vivid, more youthful.

"Yes, Nell," he said; "the ruined gold is in Italy. Ruined? No, not exactly ruined, because you always walk there. And there walks there, too, my dear, your mother. She was a beautiful woman, you see, and I loved her."

He paused a moment, and the red glow of the fire sank into itself.

"It was youth," he continued; "it was all fiery. There was a sort of charm, a sort of blaze.... I don't know how to say it. But that is the stuff of the golden castle, the birthright of the young. Young people have only got to claim their golden castles, and they instantly enter into possession. Don't delay claiming your castles, dear Nell; enter into them quickly. Live, love, enjoy. Above all, love."

The door opened, letting in a flood of yellow gaslight from the hall, and showing in the illuminated oblong the figure of Mrs. Ramsden, who spoke with the cheerful rapidity of a hospitable canary. Her voice grated on the twilight of smouldering fire, like steel cutting into silver.

"My dear James," she said, "why did not you ring for the lamp? Parker has orders, as you know, always to bring a lamp up to your study when you ring after tea."

"Oh, Lord!" said Eleanor, quite, quite quietly, and she turned towards the door. Her father did not even hear that she had spoken. Her stepmother heard that she had spoken

and what she said. But Mrs. Ramsden was nothing if not self-controlled, and she kept a firm hand on herself. But, being of excellent memory, she did not in the least forget it. Merely she did not want to make use of her knowledge just now. But it confirmed and ordered, so to speak, all that she had ever thought of Eleanor. Meantime, she was as chirpy as could be expected from anyone who had received such a welcome.

"You should remember, Eleanor, that you are at home," she said, "and must ring for anything you or your father want. I should be quite miserable"—this was not true—"if I thought you felt a mere guest in the house. There is the lamp coming. We can all talk for ten minutes before it is time to dress. Parker, have you mended Miss Eleanor's fire? Now, dear Eleanor, tell us about your life. Shall we put dinner off for another quarter of an hour, James, so that Eleanor can talk to us? I am sure we are lucky, with all the fun going on at Mrs. Wilkins', to have secured her for to-night. We must make the most of her."

This encouraging speech had the natural effect of tongue-tying Eleanor. Yet there was nothing to quarrel with: it was full of genialities. So, too, was the bright smile with which Mrs. Ramsden settled herself into her straight-backed chair. Yet the temperature of the geniality was, somehow, below freezing-point.

"Tell us about Mr. Whittaker," she suggested brightly, and thereby sunk the temperature to zero and below.

Eleanor made a tremendous effort to recapture her normal level of enthusiasm. As she spoke she was rapidly chilled.

"Oh, he's delightful," she said. "We have the greatest fun. He's so pleasant and . . . and so clever. And he wrote the play we are going to act on Thursday. Or did I tell you that?"

"I am sure it will be delightful," said Mrs. Ramsden, with the same canary-like eagerness. "You wrote to your father about it, didn't you?"

"I think I did. It's just a sort of fairy-story play, with witches and adventures."

"And the moral?" asked Mrs. Ramsden brightly.

"My dear, fairies haven't got morals," Mr. Ramsden permitted himself to say.

She was all eagerness.

"I do not think you are right, dear," she said. "Surely we can find a lesson in everything. No doubt the children

in this play are disobedient, and are captured by the witch. And no doubt the witch—that is you, is it not, Eleanor ?—comes to a bad end."

"She bursts," said Eleanor.

Mrs. Ramsden was triumphant.

"There you are !" she cried. "I was sure I should find a moral! I feel quite comfortable about letting Alice act in it."

Mr. Grey did not, it is true, offer Eleanor a part in his next production as leading lady at a thousand pounds a night, nor did he instantly commission Mr. Whittaker to write him a play, but he laughed with great enjoyment at all the right places and appeared to be prey to keen anxiety when it was still doubtful whether Elsie and Edward would not be put to boil in the caldron which steamed visibly. The audience was largely juvenile, and he, as Eleanor saw, sat surrounded by small children, one of whom, horribly impressed by the fiendish aspect and intentions of the witch, burst into a sudden roar of apprehensive terror when she began to polish up her meat-hook. Quick as lightning, Louis Grey caught up this terrified maiden, set her on his knees, and whispered some consoling reflection, for the howl ceased with the suddenness of a turned-off tap, and the child followed the further action with eager anticipation. Probably he had told her that the witch would soon burst, and the hunchback become a fairy prince. And Eleanor's delight in this involuntary tribute to her own gruesome realism was merged in a sense of his kindness. She could see the child clasping his arm with both of hers, and smiling at him.

She could spare but a moment's attention to this, but for that half-second she was full of gratitude to him for his quick stoppage of the interruption, and of a sense of warmth towards him for his kindness to the child. From what she had seen of him, which was but little during the two days that he had been here, she had formed an idea of him as being very grave, much grown-up, rather severe. Yet this child instinctively trusted him ; he had soothed her fright, and he had done it quite easily. Perhaps his grave severity was but manner. Probably he was very kind really.

The play came to an end in tumultuous applause, and the actors were recalled with every mark of popular favour. Alice, who had done nothing and had looked quite delicious, divided the honours with the fairy prince, for whom a special call of "Author" was reserved; Eleanor herself, as was right, was

received with a perfect tornado of hisses, in which Louis Grey joined vigorously. Eleanor was delighted, and, making the most loathsome of malicious grimaces, shook her fist at them, and had to return to acknowledge again her unpopularity. This time she jabbed across the footlights with a meat-hook, which added immensely to the hatred in which she was held. Recalled for the third time, she came back with a spare paper-bag, which she inflated, and burst it, signifying that she really was dead. And she saw that Louis Grey had thrown his head back, and was laughing with unmistakable genuineness.

Harry Whittaker received her as she stepped behind the wings again.

"Perfectly ripping idea, Miss Ramsden!" he said. "And thanks most awfully for acting so well. You simply made the whole success of it."

Eleanor cast off some elfin locks that obscured her face.

"Oh, I did enjoy it," she said, "and I never heard anything so silly as your saying I made a success of it. Mr. Whittaker, you must go on once more. They're all shouting 'Author!' again. Isn't it fun?"

Louis Grey got rid of his comforted child with some difficulty, since she seemed to prefer his company to her mother, and found himself talking to Mrs. Ramsden, as they waited for the actors to become themselves again before supper. There was a certain reasonableness in Eleanor's verdict of him as grave and serious, for he had come down to Bracebridge two days before, tired to death with the exacting part he had been playing all the autumn to crowded houses, and with all the business necessary to his starting in the spring as actor-manager at his own theatre. But just now, though he was still grave, there was little severity about him.

"I can't tell you what a weight was off my mind," he said, "when the witch burst. I felt she might easily send us all to the caldron. I should have faintly remonstrated, I hope, but I am sure I should have gone. But she burst!"

Mrs. Ramsden, in spite of the single-mindedness of her spirit, and the intensity of her philanthropy, still rather liked talking to celebrities.

"How clever and sarcastic you are!" she observed. "Poor Eleanor! Now, Mr. Grey, do tell me all your views about the stage. Is it not a great instrument of education? Cannot we see there so many moral lessons, taught us lightly and amusingly? I have great arguments with my husband about it."

"But surely the witch did not teach us much," he said. "She seemed to me gloriously malicious still, when we made her come and bow. Indeed, I am not quite sure she has burst fatally."

Mrs. Ramsden adjusted the garnet necklace which she wore at parties, and which she considered quite "equal to" rubies. She would not have thought it right to have real rubies, since they were so valuable, and might have been sold for much, but garnets combined splendour with economy.

"Poor Eleanor," she said, "how they hissed her! You must tell her she did not really act very badly. She seemed to know her part."

Louis Grey realized he was dealing with a serious person.

"I joined in the hisses," he said. "I hissed my execration of vice. But here comes the witch; I must bow my homage to her acting."

Mrs. Ramsden gave a wide welcoming smile to Eleanor.

"Well, I am sure, Eleanor," she said, "you must be glad it is all over, and Mr. Grey has been saying such kind things. He says he enjoyed it all very much; that you quite frightened him. How hot you must have been with all that tow on your head! But, as I was saying to Mr. Grey, you seemed to know your part very well, and I'm sure that if I heard the prompter three times, that was as much as I heard at all. And you must not be discouraged, must she, Mr. Grey, because they hissed her?"

Louis Grey made a little quick backward movement of his head.

"You must be encouraged because they did hiss you, Miss Ramsden," he said. "If you had not been a terrible witch we should not have hated you. We might have feebly applauded you. You were quite excellent—quite, quite excellent. It is easy to see you are very fond of acting."

Eleanor gave him a shy look of enthusiastic gratitude.

"I adore it," she said. "Oh, Mr. Grey, is it very tiresome to you to hear how much people admire, admire.... Because I saw you in 'Wayfarers,' and . . . and it seemed so real, so much more real, I mean, than ordinary real things."

He also looked at her gratefully.

"I thank you very much," he said gravely. "If one can make a part seem real, one has done very well."

"And it wasn't impertinent of me to say it?" asked the girl.

He was but little taller than she, and their eyes as he looked

at her were nearly on a level. The great mass of her gold hair smouldered above her face, making it look as small as a flower, and the vivacity and excitement of her mind had lit it with a wonderful intensity of expression. Pretty, it could not be called, still less beautiful, but he found himself wondering into what it would develop when the uncertain and misty qualities of childhood cleared off it as the years advanced. It was tremendously mobile, as he had already seen in the play; the part she was acting had made it incredibly atrocious, now—and he was surprised at himself for not having noticed anything of her already, except that she had wonderful hair—it seemed capable of equal vividness of expression in other lines. It was one of those faces which is lit from within, no mere picture illuminated from without, and her mind, her consciousness, that which lit it, was clearly of very lambent quality. And on the moment, as if to emphasize its character by contrast, Alice joined them. She was still in her fairy princess's dress of gold and silver, for, having assumed it at the Vicarage, it followed that she could not change it before supper, a fact which she had clearly and steadfastly in view from the beginning.

"Alice, dear, you look too lovely," said Eleanor.

"Yes, but don't crumple me," said Alice, expecting one of Eleanor's rather random embraces. "I came to tell you that supper was ready, mamma, and I am to sit at the head of the table. Will you all go in, please? I am to come in last, when you are all seated, quite alone. Mrs. Wilkins thought of it, so of course I had to say I would."

"But, my dear, won't you feel nervous?" said her mother. "Shall not I come in with you?"

"No, thank you, mamma," said Alice quite firmly. "I would rather go in alone."

Later, when the guests had gone, Louis Grey strolled down to the smoking-room, where he was soon joined by Harry Whittaker and his host. Mr. Wilkins said something about making themselves comfortable, and proceeded without pause to do so himself by falling into a quiet untroubled sleep. But Harry's methods of procuring comfort were very different, and he took an immense cigar and a large brandy-and-soda.

"It was good of you to come to the silly little play, Mr. Grey," he said. "I hope it didn't bore you beyond what a man is meant to bear. Won't you have a brandy-and-soda, or whisky?"

"No, thanks."

He cast a glance at the sleeper.

"Shan't we disturb him if we talk?" he asked in a low voice.

Harry cast a brilliant comic glance at Mr. Wilkins.

"Rather not," he said. "Why, the witch bursting didn't wake him. By Jove! wasn't she good—Miss Ramsden, I mean? I don't suppose it was anything like acting, really, but I thought she was excellent."

Mr. Louis Grey swung one leg over the other.

"Ah, I don't agree with you there," he said. "It was acting—real acting. The root of the matter was there, and the root of the matter is conviction—sense of reality in what is being acted.

Harry took a great gulp of his brandy-and-soda.

"By Jove! do you really mean that?" he said.

"Certainly I do. Why should I not? And why do you ask?"

"Because Miss Ramsden—I know she wouldn't mind my telling you—is tremendously keen to be an actress, and it would encourage her ever so much if she knew you thought that."

Louis Grey leaned back in his chair and put his finger-tips together.

"Ah! Then I am not sure whether it would not be far wiser for me to hold my tongue," he observed.

"Why?" asked the young man.

"Because it is encouraging a girl to take up a very hard life. Whether you succeed or not, it is hard, and the competition is immense, and the prizes are few. All the same——"

He paused a moment.

"All the same," he said, "it is the profession I chose, and it would be absurd in me to run it down as a profession. And I think, since, as I said, I believe Miss Ramsden has the root of it in her, she might quite well succeed. But I charge you not to tell her that I think that. I would sooner bet on *rouge et noir* than on the success of any one actor, even though I thought he had genius. For one may be quite easily wrong about his having genius, and even if he has, it is most problematical whether it will be recognized. Ability in acting is most useful in many other professions, but in the profession itself you can become almost eminent without it, or remain quite obscure with it. If I was married and had children, I would do my very utmost to make them take up any other

profession sooner than an artistic one, because in any other profession you can, given you exercise patience and industry, make some sort of success of it for certain. But not in art. No amount of patience and industry will make you even a third-rate artist, of whom there are too many. But from the point of view of art, the third-rate artist may be whole leagues above a man who is a successful actor-manager, who makes ten thousand a year."

Mr. Wilkins stirred in his chair and said : " Quite so, quite so. A very decent income."

His eyes closed again, and his mouth opened slightly. Harry Whittaker got up, poured himself out another liberal brandy-and-soda, and sat down again, with his weak, handsome face all on fire.

" Oh, do go on !" he said. " Mr. Wilkins always turns in his sleep like that, and then slumbers profoundly. Would you discourage everybody from taking up any artistic profession ?"

Mr. Grey smiled at the attractive earnestness of the young man.

" That sounds terribly heretical to you, does it not ?" he said. " But it is literally true. I would discourage everybody from taking up any artistic profession. But all my discouragement, however painful, would not make one artist the less in the world. For if there is within you It, the vocation, whatever you like to call it, no amount of discouragement discourages. I only want to make the goats realize that they are not sheep. No amount of dissuasion persuades a true sheep that he is not one."

" I say, how devilish interesting !" remarked Whittaker.

" What I say has the minor merit of being true," said Grey. " No artist was ever lost to the world by being made a clergyman or a stockbroker, simply because he always refused. I am speaking, of course, of those who have the genuine vocation. Just as the true sailor, in whose blood is the sea, always runs away from his desk, and works his way before the mast if necessary, so the true artist always finds his way to his canvas, or his pen, or his piano, or the footlights. He will take his plunge, anyhow : it is only the gifted amateur who can be discouraged. And the gifted amateur may be very pleasant, but let him not try to cultivate the austere fields."

Harry Whittaker's eye, already bright, lit a further conflagration.

"By Jove!" he said again. "What ripping things you say! I feel just like that! I hate amateurishness. And you really think Miss Ramsden isn't amateurish?"

Louis Grey laughed.

"I'm afraid I had wandered from Miss Ramsden," he said, "and was talking generally. As you mention her again, I may say that I thought there was very little of the amateur about her. She seemed—how shall I say it?—to leave nothing to chance. She didn't nail an ugly look to her face, and then rap out in a really terrible voice all she had to say. The ugly look was there from inside, not because she was a witch in the play. She was a witch, and there happened to be a play. Do you see the difference? The amateur would think: 'Now I must look ugly, because in the play I am a witch.' Again, the amateur—this is what I mean by leaving a thing to chance—would think: 'I will make a face, and then say, "Come, my children," and it will sound all right.' She didn't. She had grasped the fact that she was a witch, and so spoke as a witch would speak the line. Dear me, I am talking shop in the most unrestrained manner!"

"And I mayn't tell Miss Ramsden anything you have said?" asked Harry.

"Certainly not, please. I may be quite wrong about her, and, as I say, if she really means to be an actress, she will certainly be one. I should like, however, to say one thing more, Mr. Whittaker. I think the play was admirably written. It gave her great scope. You wrote it, did you not?"

"Yes, as far as actual writing. But Miss Ramsden suggested lots. All the red-blind business was hers. Wasn't it good?"

"It certainly was. It was correctly placed, too. I told myself that the children were going to be safe, but all the time I rather distrusted it. I said to myself, 'I thought so,' when the witch opened the door, though I had also said to myself, 'Now they are all right.' It made suspense—a subtle sort of suspense. That is the quality that holds people.

Harry Whittaker was attending now on his own account.

"Do tell me the sort of play that you think succeeds now," he said.

"The same sort of play that always did succeed—the play where interesting things happen, and, above all, where interesting things are going to happen. The most effective

climax in the world is never so thrilling as that which leads up to it. Interesting and amusing people are all very well in books, but no amount of interesting and amusing people will make a single act of one play. Think of the word itself—'drama': it means 'action.' A certain number of quite trivial incidents will make a quite passable play, but all the most subtle psychology in the world will not. Things must happen, and they must be seen happening. Of course, good dialogue is a great help, but it is scarcely a factor."

He paused a moment.

"I take it all so frightfully seriously," he said, "and, I assure you, I am speaking, as I am, of plays that succeed because they are good plays, not because the heroine's an enchantingly pretty woman. Again, many plays succeed in the popular sense of the word which are very bad plays indeed. I have them sent me by the hundred. The dialogue is always smart, and full of watery paradox. Everybody talks amusingly in precisely the same manner, and there are a number of small surprises. They are invariably well constructed, and bear the same relation to a real play as peptonized food does to sirloin of beef. The peptonized food is for the weak stomachs of invalids, the peptonized play for the weak minds of people who cannot think. Anyone who will trouble to learn the rules and has the gift of neat dialogue can write one in a fortnight."

"So that it will be accepted and acted?" asked Harry.

Grey laughed and got up.

"Very probably," he said; "but not by me."

He lit a candle for himself as Harry for the second time refilled his glass.

"I think I shall go up to bed," he said.

Harry glanced at the clock.

"By Jove! yes, it's late," he replied.

"Are you thinking of trying your hand at a play?" he asked.

Harry gave a great jubilant laugh.

"I don't think about anything else," he said.

"Well, make things happen," said Grey.

Harry saw the guest to his room, and raced along the passage to his own. He got out his manuscript from a drawer, and began reading it over with the critical judgment Louis Grey had awakened in him. The first three or four pages seemed to serve their purpose; they etched dryly with

clarity two of the principal characters. But then, so it struck him now, his folk "got talking," and, with admirably inflexible honesty he applied what he had just heard. Frankly, he considered their conversation agreeable and amusing, but they did not advance the drama, and after a couple more pages of reading, it was with disgusted eyes he waded through what he now called their chatter. At last, in a burst of exasperation, he tore the pages across.

"That will make them shut up," he said, with a certain inexorable glee.

The frenzy and zeal of the creator burned in him—a frenzy the warmth of which is not (happily for the creator) proportioned to the happiness of his creation. Whether it is a masterpiece that is provoking the rapturous pangs of conception, or the most abortive of artistic infants, the creator is possessed by the joy that is the immeasurable reward of production, and of which no subsequent critical coldness can rob him. The little climax to which Harry had risen early in the evening at the success of his piece was already far below him; he climbed to a farther summit, over firm rock. Late as it was, no question of sleep suggested itself to him; it was so necessary to begin rewriting his first act at once that it scarcely seemed a necessity: he found himself beginning it without even considering that he had to. But instinctively he lit a cigarette, and instinctively he looked round for something to drink; a habit to smoke and have a drink handy to be sipped as he worked was already half formed, though, had he been questioned as to whether such a habit existed, his denial would have been honest, for he did not know it himself. It no more represented itself to him as a habit, as did the fact that he wrote with a stylograph pen, and would have felt ill at ease and half attached to earth and mundane affairs if he had been obliged to use another. For the birth-pangs of artistic work, detachment from ordinary life is an essential condition; the surface brain that takes note of physical conditions must be numbed and paralyzed before the inner brain which conceives and brings to birth can awake to its secret and mysterious activity.

For a little while it was as if in the closed chambers of his brain there was such pent-up force of images ready for their materialization into words that he was automatically carried along by the flood; but soon, as the first pressure was relieved, the need for the accustomed accompaniment began to assert itself. He hesitated for a word, and in the hesitation his left

hand reached out to the place where his glass should have been, and the consciousness that it was not there caused a momentary interruption. Instead of finding the word he was searching for, he forgot the nature of it, the locality, so to speak, where it lived. Then, lighting another cigarette, he got back to its locality again, and after an inhaled breath or two found the word itself. But during that search the next sentence, already half cast in his mind, escaped from him; he forgot the conversational transition that should lead to the introduction of the new topic, which had to stop "the chatter" which he had already condemned to the waste-paper basket. Again and once again the same thing happened, fretting him with the effort of recollecting what had been clear in his brain a moment before; and each time the connection seemed to him to be broken by the intrusion of the desire to drink something. Bedroom water was out of the question, and before a quarter of an hour had passed he went to the smoking-room, where the tray of bottles still stood, and took back with him a tall and brimming glass.

He settled down to his work again with gusto and appetite. There was no interruption now, no checks, no efforts to recollect what his inner brain knew. All that it knew it told him, and his hand transcribed the dictation. From time to time he sipped at his glass; from time to time he lit another cigarette. Whether what he wrote was good or bad did not concern him, for the major point was gained, and he wrote what he meant to write. Then, quite suddenly, after an hour or more, he threw down his pen. Though he was still in the middle of a sentence, his brain had no more to give him. He had robbed the hive of its honey; he had to wait till his secret bees brought back fresh spoil. And, quite suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed, for the very image of the robbed hive was the end of his sentence; and, taking up his pen once more, he wrote:

"When the hive is empty, you have to wait for the bees to fill it again."

His glass was still not more than half emptied, and as he put in order and glanced over the five pages he had written, he finished it at a draught, and rose to take it back to the smoking-room, since he felt that it was better, though unimportantly so, that a tumbler, faintly odorous of brandy, should not be found in his bedroom. The room, too, was heavy with cigarette smoke, and he went first across to the windows to throw them wide, and was surprised and a little

disgusted to find that he did not walk quite steadily. Yet his head felt perfectly clear, nor did he fumble for the latch of the window; it was only that his walk was a little less precise than the normal, and his feet inclined to shuffle. But probably that was but the result of his spell of work in an atmosphere undeniably smoke-laden and unventilated, and he was content to accept this perfectly reasonable explanation. Certainly he was not drunk, and he went on his expedition to return the glass to the smoking-room with no more precautions in regard to locomotion than were reasonable when half a dozen doors of sleepers had to be passed. Then, quietly and cautiously returning, he quickly undressed and went to bed, conscious that his mind was satisfied with the work he had done. But it would not do to get into any sort of habit of drinking when he wrote, for, though he drowsily told himself that he was in no way drunk, yet when he opened his eyes the firelight seemed somehow to spin and lurch on the walls.

CHAPTER VI

ELEANOR was sitting one evening early in February by the fire in the schoolroom of Mrs. Wilkins' London house, enjoying the dusk for a few minutes rather than turn on the lights. Dusk suited her employment, too, for she was saying over to herself the slightly gruesome speeches of the Rat-Wife in Ibsen's "Little Eyolf," and even to herself her voice sounded rather creepy. In half-tones she chanted the words to herself, with little variations of pitch, but employing a rather high whining monotone. Harry Whittaker had promised to come and hear them over for her at four o'clock, and it was still a minute or two before the time when he entered.

Eleanor jumped up.

"Oh, it is good of you, Mr. Whittaker," she said. "Are you quite sure it won't bore you? I think I've got it all by heart, so will you take the book, and read the rest, and I'll try to come in at my cues."

"Of course it won't bore me," said he; "and, besides, according to contract, I'm going to see about boring you afterwards. Shan't I turn on the light?"

"Yes, just one for you to read by," said Eleanor. "Give me as much dusk as I can have. And please criticize. Right! Oh yes, here's the place! Rita speaks, 'Come in.'"

Eleanor had retired to the far end of the room, and, putting her cloak which lay on a chair over her head, made a slow and dreadful entry. Her pale, small face as she came near the fireplace seemed suddenly old and wizened, and Harry was genuinely startled when he looked up at her.

"Gosh!" he said. "Oh yes! 'Eyolf: Auntie that must be her.'"

Even in these early days of learning Eleanor had that wonderful gift of staying still. She gave her little curtsey, and then did not move again, not so much as a finger, till she had to sit down, and then, with shoulder bent forward and head bent back, she spoke her lines on that weird monotone, laughing, when her part so told her, still on the same note.

The very monotony made horror ; it was like some old wicked little spirit talking. She had forgotten to bring a bag, out of which the elfin dog was to be let, but she plucked the air so deftly with crooked fingers that Harry could almost see the unknotting and loosening of the string that opened it. Then, at the end, she tottered back into the shade of the farther end of the room, muttering " Good-bye, good-bye, a kind good-bye."

Harry put down the book.

" Lord ! You gave me the creeps," he said. " I feel that Mopseman is smelling about the room."

" Oh, I am glad !" said Eleanor, emerging again. " Do you think I've really got hold of it at all ?"

" You made it get hold of me," said he, " which is to the point. But why on earth do you study such gruesome things ? You aren't gruesome yourself, you know."

She laughed.

" That's precisely why I study them," she said. " I want to try to act, you see, and to act you have to get yourself quite out of yourself and put it into something quite different. If I only learned parts with which I was in sympathy I could never be sure that I was not being myself and not the part. But if I can make something that seems to you ever so faintly like a Rat-Wife, then I know that to some extent I have made the part real to me."

" Why, that's just what Mr. Grey said about you when you did the witch," said Harry, forgetting the charge laid on him not to repeat it. " He said you had the root of the matter, which was the sense of the reality of what you acted."

Eleanor stood stock-still for a moment.

" Mr. Grey said that about me ?" asked she, incredulous yet hoping.

" Yes, and I'm afraid he told me not to repeat it," said Harry, " but I forgot."

" Oh, I don't mind one bit about that," said Eleanor cheerfully. " But did he really say that ? Are you sure ?"

" Quite sure."

She drew a long breath.

" I should never have forgiven you if you hadn't told me," she said. " And I'll forgive you at once for forgetting that he told you not to," she added magnanimously. " Can't you forget again and tell me some more ? And why did he wish you not to tell me ?"

Harry Whittaker laughed.

"I think I've given enough away just for the present," he said.

"Very well. But as long as he really said it, I don't care two pins about the reason why you shouldn't tell me. I'm quite content to suppose he thought I should get conceited. He was right too; I could burst with conceit this moment, like the witch herself. And you have been good, not telling me for so long, and then only by accident."

A sudden pulse of blood moved him.

"I will tell you the reason some day," he said.

"But when?" asked she.

"That I don't know," he said. "But some day I hope to."

It was at that moment that the great tide of mature life began to move. He knew quite well the day that he had spoken of as "some day"; she, intimately to herself, femininely, womanly, knew (and shut the knowledge up) what was the only day on which he could say to her what he could not say now. Friendliness, and the quintessence of friendliness, which is friendship, already existed between them; both had long ago accepted its existence, and had long met on the high plateau of intercourse which breathes an air too subtle and rarefied for any but friends. But now all that which before had been fluid and in solution between them, suddenly crystallized. They started again at that moment with a solid product evolved out of friendship, instead of the fluid in which they had negligently been swimming. Now, between them and of them was this solid, crystalline thing, born of their friendship and quite inevitably in existence. Whatever passed between them after this moment of crystallization, began not from first beginnings of intercourse any more, but from the crystallization, the natural human product of intercourse between a boy and a girl who as acquaintances and friends were sympathetic to each other.

The moment and its significance were recognized by both, but the pause for its recognition was but momentary, and the freedom of their friendliness went on again unimpeded.

"I don't care about 'some day,'" she said lightly. "If I want a thing at all I want it now. And as it is quite clear you are not going to tell me now, let us continue our programme. Please begin, Mr. Whittaker; I am longing to know how you have rewritten your first act. Are you going to rewrite the second as well?"

"That's what I want to ask your opinion on," he said. "I'm rather afraid you will say I had better."

The reading took some forty minutes, and at the end Eleanor got up quickly from her chair.

"But I see it," she said. "I know the people. It happened. Of course you must rewrite the whole second act. But I've got some unpleasant things to say, too."

"Haven't you said one?"

"In saying you must rewrite the second act? A thousand times no. I dare say I'm quite wrong, but as you asked my opinion—— Why, Mr. Whittaker, the first act is real compared to what it was, and what the second act is. As you know, I liked it all immensely when you read it me first. It was always interesting and easy and lifelike. But you've got life into it now, which is so different from what is merely lifelike."

The young man looked at her a moment without replying, thinking more of her than of her eulogy or of the thing eulogized. It gratified him that anyone should think well of his work, but the special gratification here was the personal one that Eleanor thought well of it.

"Tell me the unpleasant things before I burst with conceit, as you say you are in danger of doing," he said.

Eleanor reached out her hand for it.

"There are two or three pieces in it," she said, "which are suddenly and hopelessly flat. For instance, you open quite nicely, and after a few pages you get excellent, and then for a bit it loses all its sparkle. Yes; here's the first place I mean. Up to 'When the hive is empty you have to wait for the bees to fill it again,' it is full of life. Then it's as if you got terribly bored or sleepy. Not for long, though; after a page of really very tiresome stuff that leads nowhere, you suddenly get back into the high level again. Then twice again you relapse, and you finish—oh, top-hole! It was that you did last night, I suppose. I heard you come upstairs awfully late. I sat up late, too, learning Rat-Wife."

He hesitated a moment.

"Did I make a frightful noise?" he asked.

"Well, it sounded as if you took a header on to the landing and threw your candlestick away," said Eleanor frankly.

"That is exactly what I did; I stumbled at the top step, thinking there wasn't another one. So I flew, and my candlestick flew—everything flew."

"Well, it was worth paying for the finish with a fall," said she.

"Tell me the parts you think are flat," he said. "At least

you needn't; I know them for certain. There is the piece after the hive and the bees; there is another—turn over about six pages—when they make little conversational squibs that have nothing to do with anything, and a third piece towards the end, when tea is brought in."

Eleanor verified the correctness of this.

"Just those," she said. "Do rewrite them. Or, do you know? I think I should leave out the squib bit altogether. They are quite nice little jokes, but they are only quite nice little jokes. They might really just as well ask each other riddles."

"And rewrite the other two?"

"Yes; you want the other two, but not in the way you have got them. And then go on quick to the other acts. All of this that reads as if it was quickly written seems to me the best. Oh, oh, fancy being able to write a play! If I wasn't so pleased that you can I should be consumed with jealousy. And whom will you send it to? Do try Mr. Grey, anyhow. I can't imagine him not wanting to act it, if the rest is as good as what you have done. Just fancy if he did! It would be so good that it must come true."

"That is a wildly optimistic version."

"No, it's a carefully optimistic version. I think if you thoroughly expect the nicest possible things to happen, you encourage them to. Certainly the opposite holds good: if you expect disaster, you invite it."

He got up.

"By Jove, Miss Ramsden, you do buck a person up!" he said. "I was frightfully depressed about the play this morning; it seemed to me all flat and stupid, and I thought you would think it so."

"But it couldn't have mattered what I thought," said she. "If I had thought it bad, you would merely have had to say to yourself, 'She doesn't know anything about it.'"

"It would have mattered very much," said he.

Elsie came in soon after, with a belated task concerning the dates of English kings to finish, and Harry went to his room to work for an hour before dinner. It was easy to erase the passage of squibs, but when he came to trying to rewrite the first section condemned by Eleanor, he found, as had several times before happened, that his brain was altogether empty of invention. Try as he would, he could not capture the mood from which invention springs, and already he guessed

the reason for it. For there was more than could be accounted for by coincidence in the history of the dull passages. The first one, after the simile of the hive and the bees, represented a week of laborious work during the Christmas holidays, following on that inspired night when effort was so easy and result so excellent. During that week he had deliberately and of set purpose worked either in the morning, or, if at night, without the fiery brain-spur of alcohol. The effort had been admirable and worthy of praise; for he had been quite aware on the morning following his successful night that he had drunk, to say the least of it, freely, and he had determined, fully conscious for the first time of incipient habit, to break himself. Then, weakly and unconvincedly assuring himself that a week's abstention had broken a habit that was really an affair of not more than seven nights, he had allowed himself no more than a reasonable liberality in the matter of spirits on the two succeeding evenings, with the effect that his work went joyously forward again. Twice again he had enjoined on himself the renewed habit of abstention, and Eleanor had without pause put her acute finger on those two bits of work and condemned them. They were, though one contained some "nice little jokes," utterly uncreative, uninventive, and even those "nice little jokes," as he well remembered, were the result of no airy juggling but heavy ponderous industry. There was a deduction that could not but be drawn: whatever was the constructive elf that lurked in his brain, it came out of its cave most readily when the fumes of spirits mounted there. Otherwise—so, at any rate, was indicated by these last months' experiments in the conditions of invention—it lay drowsily inaccessible, and for practical purpose unproductive. There lay the irritating circumstance: the little elf in all probability was ever full of invention and fantasy, but though he, Harry Whittaker, was the master and owner of the little elf and his inventions, he could not get them at will. It was like having a rabbit-warren on his estate; the estate was his, the rabbits were his; but they had to be ferreted for (at least, that was the apparent moral of this history) and the ferrets, he was afraid, were rather dangerous animals to let loose. They might attack him in his own house some day, and not confine their operations to the rabbit-warren.

There is a cant phrase, often heard, but, like most cant phrases, essentially meaningless, which speaks of *the* turning-point of a life. There is no such turning-point, for the reason

that every moment in our lives is, if we choose it so to be, and our will is not completely atrophied, a turning-point of a kind. Yet, in spite of the frequency of the choice we are continually making, final decisions, irrevocable and never again even debated in the mind, are with the strongest of us as rare as miracles. But poor Harry was not strong at all, and when he came to this fresh evidence, in Eleanor's correct divining, of the conditions under which his work was well done, he made, as most of us do, a compromise. He determined, just for this one occasion, now that he was so clearly in the mood for good work, as his last night's achievement showed, to have a thorough ferreting to-night. He would take the ferret, so to speak, and the soda up to his room when he went upstairs, and work with the ferret's assistance till he had mended the lame passages in the first act. Then he would make no such surrenders any more, but by sheer industry and endeavour coax his inventive powers out into the open ground of his brain. They were his, after all: he would teach and train them to work quietly and normally. But to-night—just to-night, while all the atmosphere and poise of this first act was fresh and vivid, it was surely a sound economy of force to ferret it out, and thus have done, and have done satisfactorily, with an opening act that promised so well. Besides, so he hastened to tell himself, there was no question of getting drunk; with drunkenness came a sottish stupidity, which was the very opposite of the mood he wished to capture. He needed and desired no more than that stimulus of alcohol which should give to his powers, as by a mental razor-stropping, their keenest finest edge. Thus, already, as the reader perceives, at the moment of this choice, though undoubtedly he intended to carry out his resolve in the future, he had discovered an idea—namely, that the mood he desired was the very opposite from drunkenness—that would serve as an excellent reason for some future surrender. But he did not actually contemplate some future surrender, for he had granted himself a surrender for the night, and the weak man, full of resolves, which is a common type, and to which he undoubtedly belonged, seldom looks beyond the most immediate indulgence.

A pessimistic proverb tells us that the road to hell is paved with good resolutions, by which we must suppose is meant a very different proposition—namely, that the road to that place is paved with the broken fragments of those intentions. So, too, for that matter, is the road to heaven, since there

was never yet a saint who did not constantly and consistently fail in the carrying out of his intentions. But the truer aphorism would be to say that the road to the less desirable goal was paved with good resolutions made with reservations. For the treader of the most precipitous downward path, so long as he knows it is downward, seldom abandons the luxury of decent resolves; he only grants himself larger reservations. A bad habit seems at first to have so little hold on the practitioner: he tells himself, and with justice, that he can easily break it, and that on Tuesday next, or at the latest on Wednesday, he will have no more trifling with it. Very likely, too, on the Tuesday in question he puts his resolve into practice, with the effect that Wednesday also, and Thursday, see him blameless in regard to it. Then on Friday he sees how entirely he is master of himself, tells a drowsy conscience that he has been disquieted in vain, and slips round by the back-door, so to speak, over the threshold of habit again.

It was thus with Harry Whittaker during the weeks that followed. On this first night, when he put the ferrets in to mend the lame passages in his first act, the rabbits bolted with glorious swiftness, and each idea, as it emerged, was bowled over by some well-aimed, clear-cut phrase, shot through the head. It mattered nothing at all to him that, as the hours went by, recorded by the sipping and replenishment of his glass, that his outer senses got more and more muddled. Once or twice, when he closed his eyes, thinking out some turn of sentence that should be both brief and intelligible, he found that, when he opened them again, the lights on his table swam and dived before his eyes, or that it required a conscious effort to shape the letters of the words he wrote. Sometimes one would be completely illegible, and he had to rewrite it, carefully tracing character after character. But behind this bewilderment and confusion of surface-sense and manual act there lay a shining precision of thought. The ideas stood there like rows of flowers in a magical garden, dewy and fresh, full-blown for the gathering.

With morning came the penalties of the night, but it was absurd to weigh so slight physical discomforts against the harvest that was definitely gathered, for even the headache and thirst almost vanished in the briskness and normal vigour that a cold plunge and a cup of hot tea restored to him. As he dressed he read over what he had written, puzzling sometimes over a scrawl that was almost illegible, but rejoicing

at the vividness of that which the ill-mastered hand had written. Nevertheless, the thought of having sat and drunk himself into that physical sottishness was odious and disgusting; but from to-day his resolution was to be impregnable. He would forge by patient industry the key that opened and then wound up that secret mechanism of his brain, to which it appeared that alcohol had so ready access. He would tame the rabbits of his warren, so that they came out to his whistling, without being viciously ejected by a brute, red-eyed and treacherous. And even if the physical effect after a single night of excess seemed after sleep and cold water so small and negligible, he knew that the repetition of such nights was degrading and immoral. It was thus, not in any way otherwise, that the drunkard entered on the career that led to utter wreckage, moral and physical alike. He knew that well, and, thinking of his father, with his bloated face and shaking hands, he knew how complete the wreck could be. It required the infinite patience and the endless mercy of God to tell if there was anything that could be saved from it.

For ten days his intention was confirmed in fact, and every evening after his not very onerous tutorial duties were over, he sat, pen in hand, without abatement of his determination to use no spur except that of his own desire. Indeed, this manful cudgelling of his brain was not unrewarded, for the drama to be developed in this second act was already minutely planned, and the characterization of his puppets so keenly etched and engraved in his first act that they could but move within narrow limits. And though the work was slow and heavy, there was a stimulus to urge him on, which every day grew more potent. Weeks ago he had known that he himself was getting nearer, by the pull of some irresistible magnet, to Eleanor. Now it seemed that she too was getting nearer him, not only by virtue of his own advance, but by voluntary movement on her part. Her constant friendliness had ardour and eagerness in it; without complacency he could not help knowing that she was not the only magnet, for if she drew, she was no less drawn. Herein lay the especial stimulus, for, since his heart desired her, it was by success only in some wage-earning industry that he could hope to attain her. Such, perhaps, ideal both to him in his intellectual ambitions and no less ideal to her tastes, lay between pen and paper. He had that belief in his own powers, which, though it is pathetic in those who over-

rate them, is entirely proper to such as have the equipment for success in them. Thus the desire to write a play that would be acted became overwhelming, and the need of doing so imperative. Yet, even with this to incite him, his progress was not only slow, but also uninspired.

He had read the amended first act to Eleanor, who had applauded from heart to finger-tips, and ten days later he read her what he had written since. As before, they were together at the same hour in the schoolroom, and the lengthening days of spring had enabled him to get through it, sitting by the window without lights, though dusk had gathered thickly in the corner of the room. Eleanor had turned her chair towards the window-sill, and when he had finished he looked up at her and her grave, pale face

"Is that as far as you have got?" she asked.

"Yes."

The girl got up, and, before speaking again, switched on the lights. Then she came back to her chair and sat on the arm of it, facing him.

"Oh, Mr. Whittaker," she said, "you don't know how much I want you to write a splendid play. I can't tell you how much."

There was such sincerity and warmth in her voice that, if they had not been friends even, he could not have resented what her words implied. He laid the manuscript down.

"I didn't know how bad it was till I read it aloud," he said

"Ah! but it isn't bad," said Eleanor eagerly. "We both know that. It's good, and you have improved it ever so much from what it was when you first read it. But—but think of the first act!"

"I know," he said. "It isn't good enough. It won't do."

"No. Oh, I do think it's nice of you not to seem as if you minded my saying so. Please tell me you don't."

"I should only have minded if you had said you thought it was good," said he. "I should have minded that; it would have been cruel of you."

"Cruel?" asked she.

"Yes; it would have been making a polite, meaningless stranger of yourself."

The personal note was struck, and it was just because the girl heard it ring so clear and true that she did not echo it in speech of hers. But she could not help a blush and a brightness coming to her face, and knew that he must see it there.

It was the banner she hung out for him. He saw it, and his heart beat faster, looking at that sweet, eager face and seeing her unspoken answer there, truer than any words could be. Besides, for Eleanor, there was the play to speak of, which also was he, born of his wit and his brain. She laughed.

"I take it, then, that you entirely wish me not to be the polite stranger," she said. "And, indeed, I don't think I could. I care about the play far too much to be polite stranger. I . . . I feel . . . I feel so much more like a rude friend!"

"That is much better," he said. "Now, please criticize."

She shook her head.

"I couldn't in detail," she said. "I couldn't say that any one speech is wrong. But—but they are all speaking behind a veil, somehow. It's as if they were all drowsy—drowsy and laborious. It all . . . it all wants a whisky-and-soda."

There was something startling in the unconscious appropriateness of this; it was, unknown to her, precisely and poignantly true. He took up the manuscript again.

"That is exactly it," he said.

There was but a minute's debate in his mind when he came upstairs to his room that night. His determination had seemed at the time to be thorough, and profoundly resolved, but an ingenuity which now seemed to him just as profound instantly undermined it. There was nothing in common between him and a man who was treading even the earliest steps of the drunkard's descent, for he had no craving whatever for alcohol in itself, he merely employed it as a means towards an intellectual end, to give him the sparkle and freedom of brain that were necessary to the creation of incisive dramatic writing. He felt he had been treating himself like a child, out of whose reach must be put some dangerous toy, and he was not a child; he knew the nature of the toy, and he knew the use to which he intended to put it. The act was already completely planned; he found no weakness in the carefully constructed development of it, and a few nights, big with work, would certainly see it finished, if he could judge by the speed and ease with which the first act had been emended. And, though the desire was great to get the play well fashioned for the play's sake, the desire that lay behind that and illuminated it, was far more keen. He was working not for himself alone, but for her, and all he did in the pursuit of his work was for her. Poor, profound determination of but ten days before!

As he had expected, the response was swift, and the work at which he had so industriously toiled for ten days, and which was so dull and tarnished when fashioned, began instantaneously to glow and shine under the new burnishing. Three nights' work, prolonged till two or three in the morning, saw it finished, and then, without pause now or any mental debate, he attacked in the full flame of his ardour the third and last act. He let no scruple or hesitation take root in his mind; the play was going to be finished out of hand without any thought for the conditions under which it was done. More than once, it is true, he had some momentary qualm when he went to bed no longer only half drunk, and in the morning found pages almost undecipherable. But when, with the help of hazy memory, he solved the scrawls, the qualm passed, for he found his work to be vivid and keen beyond his expectations. Besides, each night as it passed brought him swiftly nearer to the completion of his work, and when that was done, so he fervently assured himself, he would allow himself no repetition of a habit that did not yet for its own sake attract him. It was not for pleasure that he drank (that fact seemed to him of paramount importance), but with a definite object in view.

Eleanor during this fortnight was hardly less excited over the progress of the play than he; indeed, her concern for it was touched with the same personal sympathy as his. Just as to him the success of it meant so much more than the play itself, so to her the play was not only a play, but his work. Since the evening when she had condemned his first attempt at the second act, he had not read to her again, and she still supposed that he was at work on it when he was already within a night or two of the completion of the whole. He had told her nothing about that; that was to be a surprise. Meantime, though she saw that often he looked yellow and tired-eyed in the mornings, that seemed to her (as it did to him who knew the reason for it) a negligible drawback to long nights of work, for youth recks nothing of the cost of its desire. He had told her it was going on well, and though she wished she could have taken the headache on her own brow, where she would have worn it like a decoration, she could not give him the same quality of sympathy for it that she gave him over his work.

Then the end came. One morning, after the children's lessons were over, he met her in the hall, waiting to take Elsie for a walk before lunch.

"There's a little bit of news this morning, Miss Ramsden," he said. "At least, I believe you will think it worth calling news——"

"Ah, the play?" asked she. "Something about the play?"

"Yes, all about the play," he said, "or about all the play."

For a moment she puzzled over this, as over an answer to a riddle.

"About all the play?" she asked. "Oh, Mr. Harry, you don't mean it is finished?"

The unconsciousness of her use of his Christian name was what gave the use of it its charm. She had never spoken to him like that, even with the polite prefix. She had forgotten the lip-work; she spoke to him—given the prefix—as she thought of him. He was quick enough to establish himself in the same place.

"Yes, Miss Eleanor," he said (and to him, too, the Christian name came without rehearsal or difficulty), "it's finished for bad or good."

She heard her name as it had never been on his lips before; she thrilled to accept it; the thrill was necessarily of the private sort. The Christian name convention had been established between them without forethought; they had dropped into it, as Silas Wegg dropped into poetry, from friendship.

"But finished?" she asked. "All the time I thought you were still at the second act! Oh, I feel as if I had been reading month-old newspapers. I have been thinking to myself every day, 'Surely if the second act is getting on so well, it must soon be finished.' And all the time I was so behind-hand. I'm not sure it was kind of you not to tell me."

"But I couldn't tell myself that you cared," said he.

Eleanor caught sight of Elsie coming downstairs to them.

"I think you knew I cared," she said quickly. "Come Elsie, darling, you take such an enormous time putting your hat on. We shall scarcely be able to get to the Park and back."

"But mayn't I read it you now that it is done?" he asked. "I almost think you are bound to let me, as you have helped so much."

For a moment, not from pique or resentment, but simply because she cared so, Eleanor felt hurt at the first that he had told her nothing for so long, and at his declaration that he could not tell himself that she cared. But the hurt was of the

mildest and most temporary kind ; it was but of the texture of a film of mist in front of the sun. Besides, if she had helped as he said. . . .

"Helped ?" she asked. How can you be so silly ? But it would be perfectly lovely if you would read it me. When do you think ? What about this evening ? Mrs. Wilkins is dining out, I know, and Mr. Wilkins——"

Elsie put in her small oar.

"Papa will go to sleep was what Miss Ramsden was going to say," she remarked. "Miss Ramsden, dear, we shan't get much farther than the front door and back if we don't start."

"This evening, then," said Harry.

Fortune favoured these mild conspirators, and they had to wait but a short half-hour after dinner for Mr. Wilkins to fall into his usual slumber. Then since the sound of the human voice, whatever it was saying, was to him a safe and harmless soporific, Harry produced the manuscript, and read the emended second act and the third, without pause and without word or criticism from Eleanor. Then at the end, even as when before he had read in the dusky schoolroom, there was silence, but even before she broke it he knew how different was the quality of it from that of criticism. He knew that what he had written was good ; he knew she knew it. It was a comedy, in that the end was happy, but somehow the smoothing out of the misunderstanding which had threatened disaster, the emergence of serene sunlight again, brought to her eyes the tears that are wholly sweet. She mopped them away before she spoke.

"Oh, Mr. Harry," she said. "Who told you ? It happened like that. I can't think how you knew. I think I forgot to to say 'Thank you.'"

"Will it do ?" he asked eagerly. "Do you really think it will do ?"

She laughed.

"Yes, it will do until you write another one," she said. "Of course I know nothing about it, but then after all the public that goes to theatres knows nothing about it. It's you who seem to know about them. Why, it's human ! It all happened to me, only I never knew it till you read it me. Oh, can't Mr. Grey learn it, and get his company together and act it to-morrow ?"

He got up and stood before her.

"If I thought there was a chance of his doing it, not to-morrow, but next year, even," he said, "I would——"

He paused; really there was only one achievement in his mind worthy of the occasion, and that he could not tell her. She laughed again at his lack of imagination.

"Oh, what empty threats!" she said. "Besides, you know quite well there is a chance of it."

"Not the slightest!" he said. "But I don't care. I shall have it typewritten and send it to him just the same."

"So, clearly, you think there is no chance," said she.

The usual trying period of waiting, of hurrying downstairs on the postman's knock, and slowly returning upstairs afterwards, succeeded the despatch and acknowledgment of the play, and to Eleanor the delay seemed quite inexplicable. Mr. Grey had but to begin to read in order to be unable to stop until he had finished, and for a day or two after it was certain he had received it she looked for Harry to receive a telegram rather than a letter. But the days unaccountably grew to a week, and the week duplicated itself into a fortnight, and Harry had ceased to jump up from whatever occupation he was engaged in at the sound of the postman's knock, before any word came.

Then one windy April afternoon Eleanor had been walking in the Park with Elsie. The daffodils danced together in shining companies, and the yellow crocuses twinkled in the grass like a shower of sunbeams which, tired of the remote sky, had taken up permanent abode on the earth. Overhead white clouds, some like washed wool, some like spun calcedone, hurried from the West across the turquoise of the sky, and the spirit of spring whistled and sang in the budding branches of the planes. Even the fat pigeons with blurred rainbows on their necks wore a semblance of briskness, and the whole world was instinct with the vigour of the unfolding year. Never before in all her exuberance of youth had Eleanor felt so keenly the flow of the sweeping tide of life; it made her blood to bubble and her very bones to rejoice. Vaguely, too, but with certainty, the future seemed as enchanting and charged with life as the present, and she wondered at the sweet tumult of her senses. It hardly seemed possible that mere health and the exhilaration of a spring day could work such rapture within her, and suddenly she accounted to herself for her frenzy: it must be that something wonderfully joyful had happened, and that some tingling

brain-wave had given her news of it, though not of its nature. And on the moment she made a guess at its nature. There must have come news from Mr. Grey; for, indeed, nothing else in her life was so charged with the possibilities of joy. She hurried Elsie back to the square.

On the doorstep was standing a figure she knew; he was looking in the other direction, but presently turned his head, and ran hatless down the pavement to meet her.

"Louis Grey!" he said. "He has taken it."

Eleanor gave a great sigh, then rushed at him with both hands outstretched.

"I am happy!" she said.

CHAPTER VII

THE evening so big with fate as regards the fortunes of the main characters of our history arrived at the end of June. The stage-box had been allotted to the author and his friends, but at the last moment Harry found that his nerves declared his presence there to be an impossibility. True, it was also impossible to stay away; but since the one impossibility was concerned with activities, such as getting into a cab, getting out of a cab, talking between acts, and listening during their progress, he chose the more passive impossibility, and waited at home, ready for news on the telephone. The arrival of that, too, appeared to be a thing outside possible experience; he could not imagine taking down the receiver and saying "Hullo!" and acknowledging his identity. Indeed, he felt uncertain about his identity; his very mind and soul felt blurred and befogged, and there seemed to be nothing to show who or where he was, or why he was anywhere, or why Eleanor and the rest had gone to a theatre, or what a theatre was. Even Mr. Wilkins had gone with them, though for years past, where he had dined, there he had immediately slept. Harry wondered whether he would have a comfortable chair in the box, and whether he would snore.

The last month had passed in a succession of moods in which hope alternated with despair and excitement with apathy. Mrs. Wilkins, delighted at the achievement of her boy's tutor in writing a play and having it accepted by Mr. Grey, found herself far more adequately served by this really thrilling topic than by the most efficient discharge on Harry's part of his tutorial obligations, and had made Edward's lessons a matter to suit the convenience of the author, and in consequence Edward's progress in education had been at Edward's arbitrament. Thus from the first dreary rehearsals, when nobody knew when to stand or when to sit, down to the last dress rehearsal, only this morning when nobody any longer seemed to know a word of his part, Harry had spent his days and nights in the great dark cave

of the house, seeing effects be made and lost again, seeing order growing out of chaos, and then, as it seemed, chaos reasserting its ancient rights. The pleasant optimism of the theatre, which asserts that the worse the last dress rehearsal goes, the better will be the first performance, failed to console him, for he was incapable of conceiving an excellence that should correspond to so miserable an inadequacy. Even Louis Grey, with whom Harry had had a few words after the deplorable scenes of the morning, had not allowed himself to be too hopeful.

"The fact is," he said, "we are all of us a bit stale, and for my part I am a proverbially bad first-nighter. All the same, I have seen staleness utterly leave a company when it came to actual performance, and the very people who have been droning and slurring, missing half the points in the morning, as well as half the cues, have been as fresh as daisies with the dew on them. On the other hand, that doesn't always happen, and we can't do more than do our best. And if it doesn't go too well this evening, you mustn't be downhearted. You've written a very good play, whatever the verdict is. I suppose you'll be here, won't you?"

"I? Oh yes!" said Harry, really thinking at the time that he would. "And, after all, the critics are always kind to you."

"And do you suppose the stalls and the pit and the dress-circle are going to find out first of all which the critics are, and then ask them whether they ought to be amused and interested?" asked the actor.

"I hadn't thought of that," said Harry.

"I never think of anything else. Mind you, I don't prophesy failure, and I consider it a good play. The point is whether we can make the second act grip, the one which went so badly this morning, if you remember."

"I do."

"Well, if Miss Anstruther gets that across the footlights and into the house, we are all right. She has done it in rehearsal; on the other hand, sometimes she hasn't. Dear me! I wish that girl, Miss Ramsden, who acted witch in your little Christmas play was an actress But as we are booked for to-night, and she would want a year or two to learn how to act, I'm afraid we should make the public impatient. Well, I'm off home."

"And what are you going to do all afternoon?" asked Harry.

"Going to the Zoo."

"What! You can look at foolish birds and animals?"

"Certainly. By the way, do bring Miss Ramsden with the rest round to supper with me afterwards, if she would care to come."

"Thanks; I'll tell her. And if—if it's a dead failure?"

"All the more need for supper. I want a success just as much as you."

Harry's mind mechanically traversed this lugubrious conversation, as he sat in the smoking-room this evening, waiting, and he tried, though with dulled and clouded mind, to find a ray of comfort in it. But if there was, he could not get a glimpse of it. Louis Grey's last remark that he wanted a success as much as himself filled him with derisive contempt. The one was a well-established and successful actor, the other a perfectly unknown author; and even that difference, great though it was, lay on the surface only. For himself, success meant everything; it meant the chance of winning Eleanor, the chance of offering her his love. If by this play he could earn success and the rewards of sterling coin that accompanied it, he felt not the least doubt about the future. He could do as well as this again and again; if this had the qualities that amused and interested people, he did not mistrust the volume of the spring from which they came. If they had not, he was tutor, until Edward went to Eton, at the salary of one hundred pounds a year. Perhaps he could get another tutorship after that. But if it was a success. . . .

He suddenly gave a startled jump, that testified to the state of his nerves, though the exciting cause was nothing more alarming than the entry of a footman with spirit decanters and siphons; and at the sight of him the need for drink became so imperative that it ceased, so to speak, to be a need at all, and was an instinct as unconscious as the necessity of the heart-beat or the inhaling of air. Several times during this last month anxiety and worry connected with the play and all that depended on it had produced in him a craving, not so dominant as now, but still imperative enough to demand satisfaction. But now it had passed into the region of instinct, and without conscious volition he mixed and drank a glass, in which no very great mixture was required. Like magic, even while his glass was but half emptied, the liquor soothed, braced, and equalized him. The nightmare trouble passed away; he was sane again, himself, tasting the rapture

of sanguine suspense instead of the horrors of hopeless anticipation. Was there ever a young man so ecstatically placed? Half a mile away was a great theatre, filled with eager faces, watching the finest actor in London, with his distinguished company, interpreting his own play. And watching it, compelling its success—that success which she desired, he knew well, hardly less than himself—was the girl with the white face and the wonderful hair, and the voice that moved him so strangely. Already, for it was a quarter past nine, they must be at the end of the first act. Surely he must go down and see what was happening, though only one thing *could* be happening. He had told Grey, too, that he was coming. They would send for him at the end. . . . And then, with fretful piercingness of sound, the telephone bell rang in the hall just outside, and, swift as the stroke of a bird's wing, all the demons of suspense blotted out the hopes that already bordered on certainties.

He did not move. Probably the call was concerned with some perfectly different matter, and, after a pause, he heard some servant engaged with it. Then the door opened, and a footman came in.

"It's Miss Ramsden ringing you up from the theatre, sir," he said.

He felt it quite impossible to go to the telephone; the affair was not among those in which choice comes in. He could not go.

"See what it is, please," he said. "Say—say I'm out, and you will give me the message when I come in."

But he followed the man into the hall, and stood by him as he was spoken to. After an interminable while he said, "Thank you, miss," and, putting back the receiver, turned a wooden face on Harry.

"The first act is over, sir," he said. "Miss Ramsden says it didn't go very well. Nothing to complain of, sir, but not very well, she said."

Harry went back to the smoking-room, and found there the glass, not yet half empty, which he had put down. From habit, just as people will take a little more bread at breakfast which they do not want, in order to put on it the butter on their plates, which they do not want either, he drank it off, and found it apparently tasteless. That seemed to him curious, for the first half of it, drunk before this message came, had had so perceptibly the stinging aroma of alcohol. So, in the blankness of mind that had fallen on him, he filled

his glass and drank again. Then he lit a cigarette, and sat down.

It was but a minute or two that he waited, for almost immediately the blankness of mind began to roll away, like clouds dispersed before some healthy sea-wind. The first act had not gone very well; that, even in Eleanor's indulgent eyes, appeared to have been the case. But the first act was nothing more than the first act—a preface to the drama. No first act did more than tell the audience what the play itself was concerned with. No first act ever went well or badly: you had to get through with the first act before you began at all. And then the impossibility of not being there struck him. Of course, he did not know who he was or what he was doing, when his real self was down at the theatre all the time, and not only his real self was down at the theatre, but Eleanor's real self. However, five minutes in a taxi-cab would effect the juncture.

The entrance and passages were empty when he got to the theatre; outside there were two or three boards announcing the fact that the house was full. But, to judge by the utter silence as he went along the passage to his box, it would have been more reasonable to suppose that the house was empty. Once, as he went along the soft-carpeted way, a sudden, thick murmur reached him, like the distant sound of swarming bees; then there was dead silence again. The attendant turned the key in the door-latch, and he entered.

He saw heads close in front of him outlined against the illumination from the footlights. But apparently nobody had heard him enter, for neither Mrs. Wilkins, nor Eleanor, nor Mr. Wilkins looked round. But he saw that Mr. Wilkins was not asleep at all: his eyes were quite wide open, and were fixed on the stage. But that was the only fact that indicated that the whole theatre was not sound asleep, so still was it. Then, from quite close below, he heard Grey's voice saying, "You are mad to think that." And he knew that the crucial moment in the play had come.

He remembered with extraordinary distinctness the night when he had arrived at this point in the writing of his play. There was a long speech for Grey, in which he pleaded with the woman who did not believe his loyalty to her. With Grey distinctly in his mind, he had fashioned sentence after sentence, all brief, all forcible, all eloquent. Then there was a passage for the character which Miss Anstruther was taking,

of quite admirable dramatic utterance. He had sat late that night, writing these, but the night after he had sat later yet, weighing each phrase, and at intervals putting his pen through many of the sentences he had so exquisitely wrought. Each one, when he considered it fully, was unnecessary, and he was beginning to see that at moments of big emotion every word that is unnecessary is worse than useless. Given that he had reached an adequate level of dramatic situation, the problem was not how much or how richly the two characters should talk, but how little. So, instead of the three pages which had been the result of one night's work, there remained as the result of two, just two sentences, with a pause in between. He said, "You are mad to think that"; then there was silence—a silence which, if the scene was to succeed, rang with the arguments that he had cancelled—and then she replied: "Very well; I am mad!"

There had been endless difficulties over that silence in rehearsal: Miss Anstruther had failed to time it, and, what was worse, failed to realize its significance, and it was not till Harry had showed her all he had cut out that she understood. And then, of course, since her discarded speech was admirably written and altogether appropriate, it was almost impossible to persuade her to acquiesce in the silence at all, when there was such a wealth of dramatic utterance ready written to fill it. Those two curt sentences, she maintained, were mere Ollendorf, yet mere Ollendorf was better than the silence. The audience would not understand: they had been led to expect a climax—the climax—and instead they were given silence and Ollendorf. All their suspense would be quenched, so said Miss Anstruther, by the pause, and when it had all quite gone, she would observe that she was mad. But Louis Grey, though he saw the risk, took the side of the author.

So to-night Harry stood behind Mrs. Wilkins' chair and listened to the silence that had cost him so much work. He could see Miss Anstruther, who was in the middle of the stage, and he saw how admirably she held the house. Once her throat swelled, as if a sob rose there; once her mouth twitched bitterly. Then she appeared to master the storm of emotion that heaved so small a distance below the surface that it seemed it must burst from her mouth in impassioned speech, and she turned her head to Grey. "Very well; I am mad," she said, quite quietly.

It was as if some strangling constriction that held the attention of the whole theatre was suddenly relaxed, and a

great deep sigh, a long-drawn "Ah-h-h-h!" came from a hundred involuntary throats. Eleanor, belatedly conscious that someone had entered the box, turned round for half a second, just nodded at Harry, and instantly looked stage-wards again.

The rest of the act went quickly and stormily, for that moment of quiet and silence was like the centre of some cyclonic disturbance. All round it the winds raved, and the waves leaped, and as the centre was passed the characters again got into the riot of emotion which had culminated in that moment of deathly stillness. Ten minutes later the act was over.

For a few minutes the whole theatre gave itself over to shouting demands for the appearance and reappearance of the two principal actors, and the usual formalities were gone through. Louis Grey was forced to make a short speech, and, in answer to many inquiries about the author, vaguely promised that he would do his best to find out where he was; and when the fireproof curtain was eventually allowed to be lowered, a thoroughly gratified audience discussed the situation. To the stage-box, from which Harry had fled into the coolness of the summer night outside, many friends of Mrs. Wilkins made visits, and it was universally agreed that Mr. Whittaker was a very clever young man, and that Edward ought to grow up (so said Mr. Wilkins) quite a genius for having had the privilege of being taught his history by so gifted a tutor. But, strolling about outside, that gifted tutor scarcely thought at all of the tremendous success that the last half-hour had brought, or thought of it only as a means to an end; for she with the pale face and the golden hair had just said to him, "Oh, Mr. Harry, I am so glad," and that outweighed what all the rest of the world could say.

It was an hour past midnight when he drove home alone after supper with Louis Grey, in the wake of the brougham that contained Mrs. Wilkins and Eleanor. All that had happened did not seem to him in the least unreal and dream-like, but intensely vivid and actual. One moment, indeed, out of all the evening had at the time appeared preposterously improbable, and that was when he had to step alone on to the stage to make his acknowledgment to the house, and even that, the moment he had made his bow, took the aspect of reality again, for he had looked up at the stage-box, and there was Eleanor smiling at him. Again, at the end of

supper, he had had two words with the actor, and they too were inspired with the same reality.

"It isn't a little success, my dear fellow," Grey had said, "but a big one. You will be glad a month from now that I didn't let you sell your work offhand to me, and I'm glad, too. There'll be plenty of time for you to write another play before your cheques cease to come in for this, and I need hardly say that I shall be glad to read it, if you will give me the chance. So you can go and order a motor-car and marry a wife to-morrow, if you wish."

Mrs. Wilkins, with Eleanor, had only just arrived when he got home, and she welcomed him with all her effusive kindness.

"Well, I'm sure there's nobody more delighted than me," she said; "and what an evening it's been! I declare I never enjoyed a play more, and to think that you've been writing it all this time in spare moments, and nobody but Miss Ramsden knew! And I've never had such a box full of people as I had to-night; they were coming and going between the acts like a procession, and very glad I was to see them all. But I'm rejoiced at your good fortune, Mr. Whittaker, even though I suppose it means I must look out for another tutor for Edward, to teach him his Greeks and Romans. But I dare say you'll often drop in to lunch or dinner, and tell us what you are writing next."

Oddly enough, the fact of his giving up his post here had not occurred to Harry.

"That never struck me," he said, "I suppose because I've been so happy here. But it isn't good-bye just yet, is it?"

"Why, dear me, no, I hope not; though it's 'good-night,' for such a time of the night it is! Well, I have had a pleasant evening."

Eleanor followed her to the door of the drawing-room, and then turned back.

"Oh, Mr. Harry," she said, "I must say one word. And yet there's no word that will do. It's just too glorious for any word."

And then he knew his time was come.

"It's all yours," he said, "if you will come and share it. But you must take me as well. Will you, Eleanor? There's just one word that will do."

It was as if dawn glowed on her sweet face, and the word was said.

CHAPTER VIII

ELEANOR was walking home one afternoon late in November, with quickened steps, breathing the frosty and slightly foggy air with extreme satisfaction, reluctant, though she had on a rather overthick fur jacket, to take a taxi-cab, and forego the pleasure of brisk movement on this keen and darkening day. She had lingered at Hyde Park Corner to look at the wonderful smoulder of dusky crimson behind the westerly trees, and now, as she went quickly down South Audley Street, she would willingly have prolonged her walk for the sake of all those sights and sounds which to the London lover make his town so unspeakably and intimately dear to him. A little ahead of her the lamplighter was performing luminous miracles with a long stick, at the mere touch of which, apparently, the cheerful bouquets of light burst out like flowers. That was a mysterious and pleasant thought, and it was with a slight sense of disillusionment that, as she came nearer to him, she saw that his stick had a little core of flame inside it, which, after he had turned up the tap with a key at the end of it, he applied to the burner. Even then it was an attractive contrivance, and she felt that, if all failed, a happy old age might be spent tottering down the more agreeable avenues and making them bright. Farther on yet, and invisible in the dusky gloom, a muffin-bell was making its cosy promises: she wondered if she would catch him up before she had to turn into Mount Street. The shops, too, were brilliant lures to the eye: one, although the time of year was within a month of Christmas, was a vision of orchids and roses. As she passed the too-open door, a web of summer fragrance floated out to her nostrils. In another were attractively displayed all the appurtenances of a writing-table, long quill pens with dyed feathers, tapers, and trays, and scarlet sealing-wax, and stamped leather stationery-cases; in another tea-services of dainty, chintzlike decoration of flowers, and glazed earthenware stewpans. Not less agreeable were the clean, dry pavements, with the

patterns of light and shade from the lit lamps, and the roadway populous with shining-eyed motors. To her catholic mind even the reek of petrol was pleasant, for it reminded her of so many delightful hours, some spent in the country, others connected with this satisfying life in town. Most vivid of all in her mind was that drive from Mrs. Wilkins' last summer to the first performance of Harry's play, for they had been obliged to wait in the queue, and an over-lubricated engine in front of them had filled the brougham with bluish exhalations. Child as she was of the South and the sun, she welcomed with the genial friendliness of her joy-loving race all the little pleasures of every day, and yet they were but the background to the great glowing happiness, compounded of tenderness and passion, that filled her life. She was almost pagan in her tremendous zest for the joy of life; for those who are of religious mind often put limits to their enjoyment by reminding themselves that their pleasures, even love itself in its physical sense, the delight that is in the corporal presence of the beloved, are transitory and fleeting. Eleanor, pagan in this regard, knew no such limits; she enjoyed everything without the slightest reservation, and poured the whole strength of her youth and health into so doing. But as she took out her latch-key to let herself into the house in Mount Street, where their flat was situated, she paused a moment, looking up at the windows.

"Oh, God *is* kind," she said, half aloud.

Then, without pause, she smiled on the porter by the lift, and said: "Do let me pull the ropes myself, may I? Fancy, if there was a fire, and I didn't know how to get down!"

She found that Harry had come in, and, ordering tea, went to his sitting-room.

"Darling, I worked the lift myself," she said, "and brought it quite level with the landing. The lift-man said he couldn't have done it better himself, which was obvious. I have had such a nice afternoon, and I am so glad to get home. And, just think, we are neither of us going out to-night, so we shall have all this delicious long evening with no disturbances."

She bent over his low chair and kissed him lightly on the forehead, and he looked up at her smiling in those brown velvety eyes, the white of which was underlaid with black like a peeled plover's egg.

"I want to talk, too," he observed.

"All right, if I may interrupt. What is it?"

"It's the twentieth of November first of all——"

"And I've been behaving as if it was the nineteenth," observed foolish Eleanor.

"Shall it be the nineteenth, then?" he asked.

"That depends. Why?"

"Only that we said the holidays should end on the nineteenth, and that work was to begin on the twentieth."

Eleanor gave a little appreciative nod.

"Oh, let it be the twentieth, then," she said. "I long for you to begin work again. You see, it was plays first of all that—that began to make us foolish about each other. Did you see Mr. Grey, by the way, this afternoon?"

"Yes. We had a long talk. He talked most, and most of the time he rather scolded me."

"What a bear!" remarked Eleanor. "I like bears. What had you done?"

"Nothing. That was why he scolded me. He said rather ridiculous things about marriage, too. He told me he thought I was too happy. He has a dreadful theory that happiness makes people soft and lazy."

Eleanor poured out tea.

"I think that is nonsense," she said. "Pleasures make one soft and lazy, but not happiness. Happiness is as bracing as sea-air."

"The aphorisms of Mrs. H. Whittaker," observed her husband.

"Yes. And hot buttered buns. By the way, I met the Reverend the Viscount at lunch, and he told the story about 'I'm not hungry, but, thank God, I'm greedy' at full length. I laughed, but he didn't know why."

"I hate that man," said Harry. "And he and your stepmother are lunching with us to-morrow, aren't they?"

"Yes. Harry, it would be rather nice if you began the new play this evening, wouldn't it?"

"It would certainly please Louis Grey."

"And me, and yourself. How is 'The Dilemma' going?"

"Two hundredth performance on Saturday. But it's going off a little, though he thinks it will run till Christmas."

Eleanor gave a satisfied sigh.

"It is nice being rich," she said. "Pierre Loti says somewhere it is exquisite to be poor. That proves he isn't."

"I know what he means. He means it is great fun having to earn money. So it is. By the way, I had to order that motor."

"Darling, you are awfully extravagant. How much have you saved out of all those lovely cheques that come every Monday?"

"Almost enough to pay for it? Not quite, it is true, but very nearly."

"Oh, Harry, was it wise?"

"I don't know, but it came upon me like—like a conviction that we wanted it. It's no use arguing against a conviction, and, after all, the main point of money is to give you what you want. And if you say a word more about it, I shall order you a sable cloak, and a tiara and a pearl necklace."

"I should like those," remarked Eleanor. "I think I shall say more words about it."

He got up and stood in front of the fire, luxuriously stretching himself.

"I wish I had some excuse for not beginning work again," he said, "but I can't think of any. I feel particularly well and clever."

Eleanor looked at him glowing-eyed.

"You used to look frightfully tired and yellow sometimes last spring, when you were working at 'The Dilemma,'" she said.

"Well, I felt tired and yellow," said he. "I think it wrong to deceive people."

"But no amount of dissimulation would conceal the fact that you were yellow," said Eleanor. "Please don't look yellow again. I so much prefer you red and brown."

"I'll try not to," said he. "Now, Nellie, will you please go away at once? I really am going to work. You've driven me to it."

Her face fell ever so little.

"Oh, mayn't I sit here?" she said. "I won't interrupt."

"You darling, you couldn't help interrupting. The fact of your being here interrupts. I couldn't be interested in anything else if you were here!"

"Hurrah! I'll go. Have you got everything?"

The scenario of the new play was already fully worked out, and a little rummaging in a drawer of his writing-table discovered it.

"Yes, everything material. Can't be certain about the little elf till I begin."

"Oh, I hope he is there," said Eleanor, getting up.

"And let's have dinner at half-past eight, shall we? That will give me three hours, and I shan't dress if things go well. And we'll have a bottle of champagne to celebrate the beginning of term, however they go. Now go away."

Eleanor moved towards the door.

"Well, you might wish me luck," he said.

She retraced her steps, and laying her hands on his shoulders raised her face to his.

"Oh, thank God for you!" she said.

Eleanor's glow of afternoon happiness had here its fountain-head. The shops and the lamps and the muffin-man had been glorious affairs, because they caught the light from this after-glow which would certainly follow. In the same way clouds at sunset are not in themselves more magical affairs than the same clouds, greyish in texture and woolly in outline, which obscure the sky at noonday. Only they are shot with light from an oblique sun; it seems as if the sun was making them the objects of his peculiar attention. Thus she had found a wonderful pleasure in the little incidents of the street, because, when she had passed them all, gloating, she would find Harry at home, waiting for her. No doubt, even if he had been away, she would have enjoyed the cheery frost of the streets, though they but led on to a solitary evening; as it was, he "coloured her day," and all things were transfigured by her love of him. Love was the solvent her nature demanded; prone though she had always been to embrace and cherish the lovely helpless silly things of the world, it seemed to her now that she had always been embracing them blindly. Now she saw what treasure surrounded her; her natural tenderness had become in itself a passionate thing. The strictures and bindings of her girlhood had been loosed; she had come into communion with all that before had aroused only sympathy and liking. The world was a meaning thing to her now; hitherto it had been a place of riddles. Now the human bond of love knit all things together. Instead of looking at things and enjoying them, they were part of her, just because she was a woman, and because she was greatly in love. And the significance of the ordinary external world did not lose in consequence of this quickening of her nature; the effect was exactly the reverse. It was quickened, too; the whole pulse of it beat with a more vivid blood.

She went, as commanded by her lord, into the drawing-room next door to his den, which at present, though they had

been in the flat some six weeks, had remained tentative in garnishment. It was plentifully furnished, but the disposition of the pieces still lacked the note of habitual usage. There was no character in it, for, in this time of holiday they had sat, whenever they were at home, which was but seldom, in the room where she had left him now to begin the winter's work. But the fire prospered on the hearth, vivid with the frosty air, and, since Harry was working, it seemed to her somehow suitable that she should extend the borders of home to include this hitherto neglected apartment. There must be a sort of shrine by the fire: a big arm-chair for him when, after the day's work, he spent a domestic evening, as to-night, with her. There must be a low table by that, where a book or two and the evening papers should lie to hand. Or perhaps a couple of tables within easy reach were better, one table common to them, where the papers should be, and the evening tray with its siphon and biscuits and lemonade, and the letters of evening post, while the other one, quite small, should stand at the right-hand of his arm-chair, a casual depository of such chance things as a man puts down. Then, on the other side of the public table, should be placed the majestic sofa that her stepmother had given her as a wedding-present. It would hold two; he could have his private chair, if he wished, or sit by her.

All this fireside encampment but bordered on the edge of a really fine Aubusson carpet that had come from the same donor as the sofa. Eleanor—such was her ignorance—had no idea what Aubusson implied; she only knew that Mrs. Ramsden, amiably desirous of giving "really useful things," had sent with the brand-new sofa this carpet, which was certainly old, for it had been for years in the schoolroom at the Vicarage at Bracebridge. But Eleanor had always adored it, with its grey ground, and ribbon border, and centrepiece of formal roses; and Mrs. Ramsden, thoughtfully remembering her affection for it, and at the same time seeing an excuse for having a lovely new Kidderminster—the Aubusson had some holes in it—for the schoolroom, had added it to her present of "really useful things," which included a sanitary dustbin and some large coppers. Hitherto, furniture had stood about on it; now, fresh smitten with a sense of its beauty, Eleanor made wallflowers of the tables and chairs that had eclipsed it, and left it empty and ungarnished. But the Chesterfield sofa looked somehow terribly common; the pseudo-Morris chintz behaved like the Bank-Holiday crowd in Hampton Court. There

was a florid pretentiousness about it, almost unbearable. Eleanor liked the " common people," but, so to speak, she did not like their hats.

Half an hour of moving and tugging sufficed to give the room a fairly habitable air, and at the end she sat down in the chair dedicated to Harry, and, turning round in it, surveyed her labours. Some instinctive sense of beautiful things—the same sense that had revolted at Uncle Evelyn's *Magnificat* and the anthem by Blinkthorn—caused her to loathe the Chesterfield sofa. But Mrs. Ramsden was coming to lunch to-morrow, and it was not less than necessary that the resisting piece of her wedding-gift should be largely in evidence. It was quite certain that on this, her first visit to the flat, she would insist on seeing all that the flat contained, and with unerring eye she would quite as certainly observe the destination of her presents. The coppers were in the kitchen, the sanitary dustbin was almost certainly where sanitary dustbins should be, and the Chesterfield sofa was in honourable position beside the fireplace of the drawing-room. In the drawing-room, too, was the Aubusson carpet, and its presence there (whereas in the Vicarage it had been in the schoolroom only, and had grown too shabby for that) would probably confirm her gloomy forebodings as to the result of her stepdaughter's marriage. A writer of plays seemed to her a very precarious kind of husband, and, though his first attempt to secure a livelihood by such hazardous industry had been crowned with very substantial success, she had felt it wise to let Eleanor know that, in her opinion, at any rate (" for what it was worth," she was careful to add), she was taking a very rash step. In this promotion of the Aubusson carpet to a drawing-room she would see the fulfilment of her warnings. Mrs. Ramsden had been thorough enough to go to see the play in question first, so as to be able to speak with authority, and she did not think highly of it. The discouraging attitude also was partly determined by the fact that she herself had married at the age of twenty-four, and in her heart she thought that any girl marrying earlier than that attractive age was guilty of slight impropriety. It was like putting up her hair too soon, or . . . it was like letting her knees show when a longer skirt should have concealed a joint that had become more strictly private owing to the fact of fifteen.

Eleanor, seated by the fire in the chair destined for her husband, could not help dwelling in amused and kindly

retrospect on these harmless memories. It was but little more than a year ago that her stepmother, as she now fully realized, had been delighted to get her out of the house which was her home. She felt no bitterness whatever about that, for there was no doubt that they were incompatibly constituted. Yet, though all her present happiness had sprung out of that step, Eleanor wondered, with desire to find and claim all blame that could be attributed to her, how she could have made things smoother at home. This search was made with conscious purpose, for, though to-day she could not imagine that any serious friction could ever enter her life again, she knew that there must be moments even in the days of those most dear to one another, when surface relations are strained and require readjustment. At such times it was probably not enough to love and to be loved; one had to be clever as well, and tactful. Tact sprang, no doubt, chiefly from the heart—love, that is to say, was the chief inspirer of it—but it was an affair of the brain as well.

At the moment she heard the electric bell ring, and, not wanting to be at home to anyone, she ran out to intercept the servant going to answer the door. But she met her going to Harry's study, for it was his bell that had sounded, and she wondered what it was that he wanted. However, if he had wanted her, he would have come to her, and he had not done so; clearly, therefore, he did not want her, but something else. Ink, paper, pens, surely she had only that morning seen to the equipment of his writing-table; and, still wondering what it was, she turned into the dining-room, for the mere idle pleasure of wandering about the beloved home. The table was laid, silver and glass and flowers shone and sparkled on the cloth, the fire smiled, the curtains were drawn. What a delicious evening they would have!

She had hardly entered, when Morris, the parlour-maid, followed her, and went to the cupboard where bottles and glasses and cutlery were kept. She took out a siphon and the whisky-decanter, and put them, with a glass, on a tray. With these she returned to Harry's study.

Eleanor scarcely gave one thought to this—she certainly did not give a second—and went back to the drawing-room. She would rather have liked to play the piano, but that might disturb Harry, and with a sense of heroism, though wanting, in a sort of sympathy with his labours, to be employed herself, she set to work to add up household books, which had been waiting her pleasure for the last week. Then, suddenly, she

heard her name shouted from next door, and she hurried to him to see what he wanted.

"Darling, I couldn't help calling you," he said, "just to say that it's started off, red hot. It stuck altogether for an hour, and I was just going to give it up when it began. Go away!"

Until half-past eight no further sound came from the study, and it was not for several minutes after he had been told that dinner was ready that he emerged, ruffled as to the hair, and inky-fingered owing to the villainies of a stylograph.

"Oh, Nellie, such larks!" he said. "I simply could not go to dress. Do you think I had better wash?"

He leaned over her, bright-eyed and eager, holding up the stained fingers before her face. She could not help putting her mouth to them and kissing them. She loved the inky skin and all it implied.

"Oh, I am glad!" she said. "Yes; pumice-stone. There's some in the bathroom. Do be quick, because I'm so hungry."

He did not keep her waiting long, and came back almost lyrical in the praise of labour.

"I can be completely lazy without being bored," he said, "and I can be fairly lazy and be convinced I am busy, but, oh, Nellie, there is nothing so good as being really busy! That's what I began to be about two hours ago, and you've no idea how I enjoyed it. I mean by being busy, being eager to do the thing which you know you can do if you take the right sort of trouble. Give me a quiet room, and a clock that chimes the quarters, to show you how the hours go by in a flash, and a pen that streams, not necessarily at the side, as mine did, but at the point, with a torrent of the things you mean to say, said as you mean to say them."

"What is the right sort of trouble?" asked she.

"Hard to explain, but I know the feeling of it so well. It isn't a grinding effort, or a slogging effort, as when one is working against the grain; but, all the same, it is an intense effort. You have to concentrate all there is of you on a point, instead of letting your energy of thought cover an area. You mustn't press—by Jove! it is rather like driving at golf—you mustn't be violent, but all there is of you has to be thrown into the one tiny place at the back of the ball. Lord, yes, where's the champagne?"

This important omission was rectified.

"You must drink to the health of the play," he said; "not a sip, but a great mouthful. Noah invented wine, didn't he?

Do you think the Flood was sent to punish him? What a blessing he escaped, or perhaps the secret would have been lost, and I shouldn't be enjoying myself so tremendously now. After dinner will you play to me till about ten? I think I must go on writing again then. It is running a risk not to make the most of the fury for work. It is like having no rain-water tank on your house. The rain runs away instead of being stored up."

It was delicious to Eleanor to see him thus excited about his work. She had had no doubts that the instinct of creation would return again, but it was none the less delightful when it came. Then suddenly the hilariousness of his mood changed.

"But it's a precarious affair," he said, "to make your livelihood by contracting to amuse and interest other people. A bank-clerk or a tailor is a far safer thing to be, for you can go on cutting out trousers or adding up figures, I suppose, whether you feel inclined to or not. But it's different with the fellow who says, 'Now, I'm going to make up a story, and show you how it all happened. Why, he never knows from one minute to another whether he can or not! He may feel ever so much inclined to, but perhaps It—the bit of brain that makes things up—doesn't choose. Can you get at it, I wonder, as you can get at a cold in the head or a bilious attack, and stir it up? Coleridge wrote 'Kubla Khan' under opium. But if you do much under opium, you soon cease to do anything at all."

Eleanor laughed.

"You will have to get rid of me before you take to opium," she said.

"No; I should be sly, and not let you know. I should say it was quinine."

He looked at her sideways a moment, and for the first time was not frank with her, using apparent frankness to conceal the absence of it.

"Funny thing this afternoon," he said. "I sat there nearly an hour, as I told you, and nothing happened. Then it suddenly occurred to me that I wanted a whisky-and-soda. I hadn't drunk half of it before things began to happen. So I'm writing on whisky, which is next door to opium."

Then he became quite grave again.

"Gosh! I've seen the curse of it," he said. "By the way, I heard from him this afternoon—my father, I mean."

Eleanor looked at him with eyes full of sympathy and quiet understanding.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He doesn't change much. He proposed paying us a visit here. The idea is that I am living in the lap of luxury, as I am, and that he hasn't a penny to buy—to buy what he wants. I sent him some money; I declined the visit."

Eleanor got up and came round to her husband's side.

"It's like seeing a man drown," she said. "And you know what happens to the money you send him. I wonder if you ought."

"It stops him wanting to come here," said Harry. "That is quite impossible. One can't—one simply can't——"

"Oh, Harry, the utter misery!" she said. "And to think that it all began in little ways! The heaviest chains that ever a poor wretch wore were all forged by himself. Poor thing!"

"It's no use thinking what we can do," said he. "We can't do anything."

This drop into the tragical was not of long continuance, and in the next room they quickly emerged again into the adorable, self-sufficing bliss of the newly married. The clouds of the sunset which Eleanor had watched from the corner of the Park had broken in floods of the streaming rains of spring, and to them the sound of the showers flung against their windows by the strong south-wester gave an added sense of rapturous isolation. To-night, too, another inmate, intimate and hugely welcome, had taken its rightful place: the new play was already beginning to grow under Harry's hands. It seemed not less than a new presence to Eleanor, at least, when he had fetched it from his room next door, and read to her the admirable opening. It was, though part of him, and thus admitted to share their evening, a thing that had a life of its own, and, though barely begun, to be as full of vitality as the green erect horns that the hyacinth bulb puts forth in spring. But this reading of it broke up their evening earlier than had been planned, for the fury of creation again seized him, and it still wanted some half-hour to ten o'clock when Harry, ardent with anticipation, went back to his study. He said "Good-night" to Eleanor first, in case the elf was intending to pay him a long visit, and passed without effort or sense of transition into the atmosphere of his drama again.

For an hour he was absorbed, unconscious of all external sensation, though from time to time he unconsciously lit a

cigarette. But then he began to be gradually more and more aware of the actual and material world, and of himself, and the thoughts which up till then had been so completely detached, sailing like balloons through a serene air, put out, as it were, anchors and grappling-irons, which caught with jerks and momentary stoppages in mundane objects. He was conscious of being cramped from having sat so long in one position; he was aware that the fire wanted attention; he heard again the streaming of the rain on to the window-panes, and the rumble of vehicles in the street. He was aware, too, that just out of reach, on the revolving bookcase to his left, stood a tray, with siphons and bottles.

He got up to stretch himself and to mend the moribund fire, and then, sitting down again, tried to go on with his writing. But the mood, the power to take the right sort of trouble, had deserted him. Yet he had the power really: it was within his brain, but it was just out of reach—only just out of reach, on the top of a revolving bookcase to his left hand. And it was so important to get hold of the play now, to get that mastery of the characters that was essential to their true delineation. They had developed themselves (for it appeared much more that they were telling him about themselves than that he was making them live) so surely and correctly up till now, but as yet they were still not more than outlined. It mattered more than anything else to get them solid, standing firmly on their feet, and, when once that was done, they would be secure; he could handle them after that. . . . And five minutes later the external world had passed from him again; neither the revivified fire nor the street noises made any impression on his senses. But the tray was within reach.

Mrs. Ramsden neglected few opportunities of improving both her own mind and the minds of other people, and, after a visit to the dentist next morning, for which purpose primarily she had come up to town, which, happily, left her with nearly a whole unoccupied hour, she went, with a view to her own improvement, to the South Kensington Museum, there to spend the time before she was due to lunch with Eleanor and her husband. She had no particular bent among works of art; it suited her as well to see tapestries as armour, pictures as porcelain. Sculpture, perhaps, alone did not seem to her a fit subject for the student: it was apt to be nude. So, having paid her sixpence at the turnstile (it was re-

grettable that this did not happen to be a free day), and having seen something nude not far ahead, she turned abruptly to the left, and ascended the staircase. On the walls were hung tapestries and works of various looms : carpets of all kinds—Turkish, Persian, Arab—the dates and description of which she duly read. And then she suddenly came to a stop, for, turning a corner, she found herself standing in front of a strangely familiar type of carpet—none other, in fact, than that which had been in the schoolroom at the Vicarage, and which had been replaced by a handsome Kidderminster. For the moment she could not remember what had happened to the displaced floor-covering ; she only remembered the richness of the successor. Then in a flash she recollected her generosity. She had given it to Eleanor as part—part only—of her wedding-present. For there had been a splendid sofa as well.

This was no time for small economies, and she instantly bought a sixpenny catalogue, which gave more precise information about the treasures of the collection. Hurriedly she turned up 362A, and read about it. Aubusson, apparently, implied a French loom of some importance, and this particular carpet had been purchased by the Museum for the sum of £350. At this her well-balanced brain staggered. This seedy specimen opposite which she stood was not so large as the old schoolroom carpet, and though the old schoolroom carpet was worn with much honourable use, this framed and glazed specimen was still more frayed and downtrodden. But in other respects the two were twins. There was the same centre of flowers, the same greyish ground, the same ribbon border, the same corner-pieces of flowers. It was not possible to doubt the authenticity of what she had given Eleanor.

Mrs. Ramsden sat down on a little hard chair, her appetite for culture momentarily checked by this exciting discovery. Her intentions were clear enough : she meant, beyond any question, to get that carpet back from Eleanor and sell it. But she felt far from sure that this would be an easy achievement. It would be like Eleanor, so she thought, to prefer to keep it, especially if she knew its value. On the other hand, it would be difficult to lead up to its rebestowal without giving the real grounds for it : it would not be plausible to develop a vague and aching desire for it for its own sake, and, besides being unconvincing, such a course would not be truthful. It is not implied that inexpediency had to be added

to falsity in order to strengthen Mrs. Ramsden to reject such a course, but inexpediency certainly added weight to what was probably quite heavy enough already. So she determined to be perfectly frank about it, and merely ask for the carpet's return. She hoped that Eleanor would be sufficiently fair-minded to see the matter in the right light, but she did not feel at all certain about it. Eleanor's was a strange, difficult nature.

It was frankly impossible to get interested in carpets any more, since one of them was so transcendently more absorbing than all the rest, and she went on to the collection of English china. After her discovery, it was hard not to consider the specimens in a personal light, to wonder whether in the cupboards at the Vicarage there might not be new treasures lying *perdu*. Certainly a quantity of what was here elegantly set out in glass cases seemed of very common quality; it might easily be that at home lurked similar teapots and sugar-basins. The hunt for culture had become a mere lantern to guide her to the discovery of hidden valuables. She seemed to recollect an old dinner-service strangely resembling one of Worcester manufacture, and gradually conjured up the recollection of a mug that was intensely Salopian.

She arrived by intention at Eleanor's flat some minutes before the appointed time, and, on being shown into the drawing-room, saw the once-despised Aubusson. That looked bad: it seemed possible that its value was known to Eleanor, since it appeared in this place of honour, and that she had not communicated this fact to its donor. Mrs. Ramsden instantly opened the subject.

"I have spent half an hour at the South Kensington Museum, Eleanor," she said, "and I saw there hanging on the walls a carpet exactly like this one, which I gave you out of the schoolroom."

Eleanor was slightly distracted this morning. Harry was not looking very well, and he had spent a perfectly ineffective morning, fruitlessly trying to work.

"Yes, it came out of the schoolroom," she said, not taking the implication. "I was always so fond of it. Does it not look well here?"

Mrs. Ramsden observed it critically. "Do you know, I hardly think it suits your furniture," she said. "Ah! there is the sofa I gave you, too. That just suits the rest. I should have said you wanted rather more colour on the floor, and, indeed, it appears that an Aubusson carpet like this is

more the sort of thing to hang up on the walls of a museum than to walk about on."

Still Eleanor was quite unconscious of the point, and thought she was attending very nicely. This attention was the result of effort: her mind was really busy elsewhere.

"Oh, I like using things," she said. "After all, a carpet was made to be walked on, and not to hang on the walls. I think I shall continue to use it, do you know? It reminds me of such a lot of nice times at home, and I think the carpet is delicious in itself. And don't museums always give you the same sort of feeling as the Zoo? I feel sorry for teapots put in a case, and illuminated books always open at one page. It isn't what they were meant for."

This might be obtuseness—Mrs. Ramsden hoped it was—but it looked like cunning.

"I am sure I should have had it taken up and sold at once," said she, "if I had known its value, instead of letting it be walked about on. I never, of course——"

Eleanor interrupted; she had not up till then had the faintest idea of what her stepmother had so firm an idea of.

"Oh, but please take it back," she said quickly, "and do exactly what you like with it. Of course you only gave it me because you did not know it was valuable. I mean, I would never have taken it—you see what I mean——"

Mrs. Ramsden was in a winning position. She made the most of it, and won.

"Pray, Eleanor," she said, "do not think that I had that in my mind, though, of course, as you so kindly suggest I should take it back, it would be churlish of me to refuse. Of course I will give you another carpet in its place, and one that will be more suitable to your very pretty furniture. As for my only giving it you because I did not know it was valuable, I do not, as you ask me, quite agree with you."

Eleanor looked at her with quiet wonder.

"But you know I did not mean what your interpretation implies that I meant," she said.

"I should be sorry," said Mrs. Ramsden firmly, "to nail anyone down to the literal interpretation of what she said, because I am aware that we all, myself included, often say what we do not quite mean to say. I will try to refute what your words seemed to imply by the carpet I will send instead of the Aubusson."

All the long antipathy that had existed between them for so many years boiled again at this. Over so small a matter,

infinitesimal at any rate to Eleanor, as a carpet, they were radically antagonistic. Eleanor for her part would sooner have bitten her tongue out than used it to ask back a gift she had bestowed, whatever that gift was, but she saw quite clearly how reasonable such a request was, if the gift had been, as this had been, one which was not supposed to be of the slightest value. Only, and here lay the difference between them, she could not possibly have brought herself to make a demand or give a hint of this sort of reasonableness. She could scarcely imagine making a gift that would cost her nothing, but if that gift turned out to be worth a great deal, she could not imagine any attitude of mind that was not congratulatory to its recipient. The donor could not, in her estimation, fail to be delighted that something of value had been bestowed, whatever the intention was. But she shook her mind free from all such thought, as a dog shakes itself when coming out of the water, before she replied; and there was nothing but cordiality in her voice.

"But how exciting to find it is valuable!" she said. "I am so pleased. Will you sell it? Or perhaps it is daddy's. Or is it yours?"

"Your father and I are not likely to quarrel over the ownership of it," said Mrs. Ramsden. "It will, of course, be sold. The one I saw in the Museum to-day was not so fine as this, and it was bought for three hundred and fifty pounds."

"Oh, then do persuade daddy to buy a motor-car," said Eleanor. "It would make all his district-visiting so much easier for him. Three hundred and fifty! Just fancy!"

Her husband came into the room at this moment, and she turned to him, all genial.

"Oh, Harry," she said, "daddy can buy a motor out of the carpet. It was in the schoolroom at home, and it is worth its weight in gold. Isn't it fun?"

He shook hands with Mrs. Ramsden.

"Are you taking the carpet back?" he asked.

It was strange how awkward so simple a question could be. Eleanor instantly smoothed out the difficulty.

"Of course, dear," she said. "It isn't a carpet any longer, but daddy's motor-car, or something nice like that. And doesn't your sofa look nice there, mamma?"

Mrs. Ramsden, was suddenly stung to a corresponding generosity of spirit.

"And I will give you a Kidderminster as handsome and

expensive as the new one I bought for the schoolroom," she said. "That is, of course, if the Aubusson fetches anything like what there is reason to expect that it will."

Eleanor looked at her again with that queer, short-sighted gaze and irregularly smiling mouth that gave so great a charm to her face.

"That will be kind of you, mamma," she said.

Lunch followed immediately, and Eleanor and her stepmother were alone again afterwards, while Lord Rolleston lingered with Harry to smoke a cigarette in his carp-like mouth. Eleanor had been at pains to give her guests a sumptuous banquet of all that was not strictly in season, and everything had been excellent. She wondered if Mrs. Ramsden would be mundane enough to be gratified. . . .

"Dear me, it is half-past two already," she said, as they came back into the drawing-room; "and no wonder, for you gave us a dinner rather than a lunch. However, I shall want no tea."

Eleanor mistook the intention of these remarks, and felt a childlike pleasure in this appreciation of her hospitality.

"Oh, I am so glad you had a good lunch, mamma," she said. "Was it really well cooked and well chosen?"

She was shortly and decisively undeceived.

"I am sure I cannot say as to its being well cooked," she said, "since clean food is all I ever ask; but as to its being well chosen, it would not be the sort of choosing that I should indulge in, and, since you ask me, I must say that I regret you put yourself to such expense over entertaining my father and me. I dare say French beans are two shillings a pound at this time of year, and as for pineapple-pudding, I should have thought that apples were good enough. I should not, of course, have thought of saying anything about it unless you had asked me."

For a moment a shade of disappointment passed over Eleanor's face, but it cleared again before this little speech was over, and she sat down on the sofa by her stepmother, with the little humorous irregular smile on her mouth which that lady did not always understand.

"No; and it is so kind of you to tell me," she said. "But you see we both hate turnips and carrots and cabbages and all the dreadful winter vegetables."

"A good cook," said Mrs. Ramsden, "such as I have at the Vicarage, makes the commoner and cheaper materials into delicious dishes. If you would like to send yours down for a

couple of days sometimes, Mrs. Mytton will be glad to give her lessons."

The irregular smile widened a little on Eleanor's mouth.

"That is so kind of you, mamma," she said.

"What do you pay your cook, Eleanor?" she asked.

"I think forty-five pounds," said she.

"A year?" asked Mrs. Ramsden, almost thinking she must have misunderstood, and that Eleanor meant perhaps a century.

"Yes, a year. And beer-money."

"Mrs. Mytton gets twenty-five pounds, without beer-money or washing. I see, Eleanor, that our ideas of what is right to spend on housekeeping are very different. But I hope I am too old to think of changing mine."

In a small way at that moment Eleanor despaired. She tried eagerly and quickly to put herself in Mrs. Ramsden's place, to attribute to her all the excellent motives which might lie between the graceless words and the ungenial tone; to remind herself that her stepmother only wished to encourage her in habits of thrift and careful housekeeping. But, try as she would, there remained a solid sediment of something unamiable and unloving. That her stepmother's words were dictated by a sense of duty she did not for a moment doubt, but she could not, alas! doubt either that Mrs. Ramsden, in killing dead her own pleasure in giving her guests a good lunch, in being hospitable, in making them a little feast, felt not the smallest compunction for what was a very brutal sort of murder, since it was the murder of something joyful and innocent. Indeed, perhaps she scarcely knew that she had murdered it at all; she had killed it casually, as she might have trodden on an ant, not knowing it was there.

Mrs. Ramsden observed that the irregular smile faded from Eleanor's face. Perhaps Eleanor was thinking about the loss of the Aubusson carpet, and she hastened to supply silver linings to this cloud.

"As regards the carpet, dear Eleanor," she said, "which you are so kind as to wish me to take back, I desire that you should be put to no expense about it. Naturally, I do not want to have it used any more, and risk further damage to it. Indeed, I see in it several worn places which I do not remember when it was at the Vicarage, so would you please order it to be carefully packed and put away until I send for it. And please send the packer's bill in to me. I will make arrangements for selling it at once, and shall then feel real

pleasure in forwarding you, carriage paid, another carpet, which I guarantee you will find both handsome and serviceable. I see the floor is parquet; I hope it will not inconvenience you to be without a carpet for a little while."

Eleanor felt again that sinking of heart which was familiar to her from similar typical arrangements of her stepmother in old days, and suddenly the thought of being given another carpet in place of this one was impossible. This Aubusson had, she knew well, only been given to her because it was not wanted at home, and she desired nothing else to take its place, since anything else would cost something.

"Oh, mamma, pray don't bother about it at all," she said. "Of course the carpet shall be taken up, and I shall just choose another and have it put down. It really is not worth all these plans."

"I beg, Eleanor," said Mrs. Ramsden, getting up, "that whatever you buy you will have the bill sent in to me. Ah, here is papa and Harry. I can just have ten minutes' chat, and then I must be off."

CHAPTER IX

LOUIS GREY had let his theatre for the performance of a children's play during the Christmas holidays, and was dining one night, just before his departure for a month in the Riviera, with the Whittakers. The occasion was of some importance, since Harry's second play had been completed, and he was going to read it to the actor this evening. For the last six months he himself had been acting "The Dilemma" every night, as well as at matinées on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and he felt that his long-delayed holiday had been well deserved. But the booking-office returns had of late shown a considerable falling off, and, though the play was not yet really moribund, he proposed, if the new play suited him, to begin rehearsals of it at once on his return. The last six months, however, had been extremely successful, and he looked forward, not only to his holiday, but to this evening, with peculiarly pleasant anticipations. There was the interest of hearing the play, to begin with ; there was also the charm of an evening passed with Eleanor. For the last month or so he had always had a standing engagement to dine with them on Sunday evening, finding a greater stimulus and refreshment there than was to be got by spending the day out of town. In a large and varied circle of acquaintance and friends, he knew of no one so infectiously full of vitality. He had a flat not ten minutes' walk off from them in Grafton Street ; it was pleasant on this cold, still evening of seasonable weather to walk there, and his mind, in the holiday mood, had the alertness and keenness of a boy just escaped from the fixed tasks and hours of school. Enthusiastic as he was in respect of his profession, his enthusiasm was by no means limited to that, and he brought the same appreciative zest to the enjoyment of the world outside the theatre as he did to the mimic life within it. One seemed to whet his appetite for the other, and to-night he was to have both the social and professional side catered for, since he was dining with this charming young woman, whose husband was going to

read him a play. And though he knew he was not late, he unconsciously quickened his habitually brisk steps, since his feet were taking him on so desirable an errand.

On entering, he found Eleanor alone, and she greeted him with that welcome so characteristic of her, from its complete naturalness. There could be no doubt she was greatly pleased to see him, and he stopped himself in a moment of wondering whether she had the same cordiality for everybody. He certainly hoped she had not.

"Ah! but this is nice," she said. "We are lucky to catch you before you go."

"I am fortunate to be caught," said he, laughing. "That is the fish's point of view."

"But let us sit down," she said. "That villain Harry has only just this moment gone to dress. But it was in honour of you, so to speak, that he is so late, since he has been working and polishing at the play without a pause since lunch. I always thought slavery was abolished in Christian lands. But the last week has made me think that poor Harry is your slave."

"And the last six months have made me think that I am his," remarked Grey. "Do tell me: what is the play like, and how is Harry? Or should I ask those questions the other way round?"

Eleanor patted the air with a level hand, as if equalizing them. It was an extremely dramatic gesture: it exactly illustrated what she said.

"Ah! they are like that. The play is Harry: Harry is the play. But I'm glad it is finished. Tell me, Mr. Grey, does hard work make you tired? You don't look as if it did. But it makes Harry awfully tired and cross—oh, so cross, though only in the morning. I tell him I am going to be divorced from him every morning, and marry him again every day in the afternoon. Harry darling, I've been telling Mr. Grey what a bear you are every morning. But you have been quick!"

The bear certainly made a jubilant entry, sliding on the parquet floor on a Persian rug, which, with a couple of others, did duty for the Aubusson carpet which had originally been there.

"And the bear nearly fell down," he remarked, "in which case the sore head would have followed. How are you, Louis? Is it any use my trying to make myself agreeable, or has Nellie taken away all my character?"

"Not a shred left."

"I supposed not. Entirely because I am three minutes late."

Certainly there was no symptom of fatigue about Harry this moment. His brown face was flushed with colour, his eyes bright and restless.

"Darling, have you had a hot bath, too, in these few minutes?" asked his wife.

"No, nor cold. Why? Do I look clean?"

"Not a bit, but rosy."

"Ambiguous. One is rosy from triumph or alcohol. Frankly, it's triumph. I've been sitting in my horrible room since half-past two, Louis, grinding over this measly melodrama. But, measles and all, it's done. Come on; let's have dinner. Nellie, is there no lady for me?"

She looked from one to the other, and then took an arm of each.

"Faith, hope, and charity," she said. "Harry is faith, because he believes he has written a good play; I'm hope, because I sincerely trust it is so; and Mr. Grey is charity, because—because he has come to dine with us."

"At great self-sacrifice. Think! I might have been dining all alone at this moment, as the witch hoped to do in the house with the red blinds."

"What witch?" asked Eleanor. "Oh, do you mean me in Harry's children's play? Fancy your remembering!"

She looked across at her husband for a moment, asking a tacit question, and receiving his affirmative nod in reply. Then she turned to Grey again.

"Mr. Grey, you nearly made me burst with pride, just as the witch burst. Harry told me what you said. He told me a bit by accident, and, of course, when we married I made him tell me the rest. If I had gone on being a governess, I really think I should have written to you and asked you if you would give me a small part in some play. I was quite mad to go on the stage. In fact, I am still, but, you see, I've got other things to do now."

The conversation had been trivial enough up to this point; then suddenly some graver note sounded in it.

"You would make a tremendous success," said Grey. "But I advise you not to try."

Eleanor gave a little sigh, shaking her head like a tremolo, swiftly, infinitesimally. Looking at her, Grey saw that the gesture was perfectly natural; but again it entirely expressed her words.

"Oh, Harry, why did we meet?" she said. "I might be on the road of a successful actress now, if it had not been for you! As it is, I am an ordinary wife."

Grey turned to Harry.

"That's a good comedy line," he said.

"No, tragic, Mr. Grey," said she. "I've given up being a witch to become a wife."

"You were an admirable witch," said he.

Harry laughed.

"I suppose I must join in the *Lobgesang*," he said. "She is an admirable wife."

"Thank you, darling. And we are all talking exactly like the second act of the new play, only there tragedy lies below the comedy."

"But you said that what I considered your comedy line was tragic also," said Grey.

"Yes; but I should have said that it was farcical," said she. "But, Mr. Grey, you haven't explained why you advise me not to go on the stage, though you say I should be a tremendous success. You can say exactly what you think, as I no longer have the slightest intention of going on the stage. Harry is there already, you see."

Again the grave note sounded. Louis Grey looked first at Harry, then at her.

"Because you are happy already," he said. "The only reason for doing anything in the artistic line is that you are unhappy unless you do it. It becomes a necessity. People take to it—those who really have to take to it—from necessity. It is a craving, like drink."

Eleanor leaned forward and struck a soft, precise blow on the table with her fist.

"Oh, then I had that craving once," she said. "It was the night after I saw you in 'Wayfarers.' I knew that nothing else was worth doing except acting. Ah! the real world was so much less real than the mimic world! And then——"

She paused a moment, lifting her eyes towards her husband, while the queer irregular smile hovered on her mouth.

"And then Harry recalled me to a sense of reality," she said. "I feel like that philosopher—who was he?—who, when he was told he was dying, said: 'Quel perte irréparable!' He thought of the world that was going to lose him, and condoled with them. What a darling! And I think

of the pit and the gallery, and—and hope they will get along pretty well without me!"

Eleanor made a wonderful comic gesture of pity and farewell, and broke up the subject with a great laugh at her own farce. But gesture and laugh were unconsciously, supremely dramatic. Her words were farce; her action was unpremeditated, but farce also. She had, so thought Louis Grey, that inborn gift of suiting herself, without thought, to her words. He had noticed it when she acted the witch; in the daily affairs of life he had noticed it twenty times since. But what he felt more than noticed was the freshness and fascination of the personality that lay behind the dramatic gesture and utterance. It was all natural to her: she was dramatic by accident; that, at least, was but a flower from the personality which was so fascinating. She foamed and bubbled, not on purpose, but simply because she was of the nature of a fountain.

Dinner was over, but with cigarettes and coffee they still sat at the table. Then Harry spoke.

"Soon I must read my rotten play," he said. "But before I do that, Nellie, will you do the Rat-Wife? I want Louis to see you do it."

She laughed.

"Oh, Harry! To convince him that I can't act?" she asked. "Leave him with blissful ignorance, and me with an undeserved reputation. Besides, dear, he has been wallowing in the family's drama for the last six months. I should think that was enough for anybody."

"But I am going to wallow again in half an hour," said Grey. "Do make the family's drama continuous. Break the shock of Harry's new play by the Rat-Wife."

Eleanor got up.

"You shan't be able to say you 'pressed me' to do it," she said. "If I said I wouldn't, you would be politely bound to press me, so I am going to yield gracefully, without any pressing whatever."

Then a sudden misgiving seized her.

"Oh, Mr. Grey!" she said, laughing. "Indeed, we haven't brought this upon you on purpose. It's been quite accidental, hasn't it, Harry? Really, I am not going to write you a sweet little confiding note to-morrow morning, saying that you seemed to be rather impressed by my rendering of the Rat-Wife, though perhaps it was only your kindness, and would you give me Lady Macbeth, or some such trifle, if you

are thinking of putting it on? But it would be absurd to pretend that I don't love doing the Rat-Wife, if you really would like me to. Harry, bring the copy of 'Little Eyolf,' which is in my room, and say the other characters; also a cloak, dear—any sort. I shall forget all the words, Mr. Grey, but if I think for a minute, I shall remember the spirit of it. Aren't we being absurd to-night? And isn't it fun?"

Eleanor put both elbows on to the table, and buried her face in the backs of her uplifted hands. Her wrists were turned outwards, from where Grey sat, while Harry went to get the book and the cloak; he could see the pulse, a little quickened, beat below the smooth white skin. Her face was hidden, but her finger-tips made brown caves in the gold of her hair. And for a couple of minutes or thereabouts she sat there, completely unconscious of him, recapturing the "mood" of the Rat-Wife. Half of his conscious personality—the dramatic half—was charmed that it should be so; half, the ordinary man's half, of it was conscious of complete neglect. She was tuning herself to a representation in which she was going to absorb her ordinary personality, and he, Louis Grey, was no more to her than the chair on which she sat. He, artist, knew that that absorption was necessary to the little performance he had urged her to give. But—and this for the first time—he would have been more than satisfied if in that interval, while her husband was seeking a copy of the play and a cloak for her impersonation, she had looked up and said: "Oh, Mr. Grey, I really think I can't!" Instead, he had the buried face, the entire unconsciousness of him, and the slim fingers plunged in the golden hair.

Harry's return with the necessary accessories roused her.

"I know I shall forget it all," she said, "though last spring I knew it by heart. Move the table a little, darling. Yes, that will do."

Already, when she got up from her place and took the cloak he had brought her, her face had changed, and when, the moment after, she came back from the far end of the room to make her entrance, it was barely recognizable. That sweet, irregular smile which was so constantly wreathed on her mouth had become, with the thrusting forward of her chin and projection of her lower jaw, a thing scarcely human. The straight gaze of her short-sighted eyes was ever so little inclined inwards, so that a squint was just suggested: you could not tell if it was a squint or not. Her fingers, fine

and perceptive, had crooked themselves, and trembled a little; they were objects to be distrusted, and quivered with queer designs, and her voice, high-pitched, monotonous, a little husky, was weird and elfin. Unhelped by scenery, undisguised except for the quite unsuitable red cloak that she threw partly over her head, it seemed to Grey that she had dehumanized herself, had grown old with the age of the dreadful primitive things that may be feared to lurk in woods and shadowed places under cloudy skies after sunset. Necessarily, from his training and experience as an actor, he was quick to catch her intention, but his experience, too, showed him how marvellously she had embodied it. And as the scene proceeded, his wonder grew, for he became aware that he was looking at acting that was not amateur at all. It was finished and professional, with all the ease about it that is the fruit of intelligent and well-directed toil, of care that leaves nothing to chance. More than once she forgot her words, but she never dropped her impersonation as she waited to be prompted. She did not become Eleanor again at the interruption. And this, perhaps, struck Grey most of all, for it showed that infallible sign of the true dramatic instinct—the complete identification of the actor with his part. She did not become Eleanor, because for the time being she was not Eleanor.

The little scene lasted but six or seven minutes, and she made her exit through the door into the drawing-room, standing with her hand on the latch as she said, "Good-bye, good-bye—a kind good-bye." Next moment her natural voice spoke to them.

"And now I've got to do the hardest part of all," she called out—"to come back as I, who has been making such a goose of myself. Well, well!"

She entered again, and Grey stood up.

"Thank you very much," he said. "That was an absolutely first-rate piece of acting."

Eleanor had done the Rat-Wife perhaps half a dozen times before her husband, but with no other audience, and was accustomed to hear him say that it gave him "the creeps." Indeed, at this moment she thought it quite possible that she might have given Mr. Grey the creeps too, for she could not have worked at this tiny little scene in the way she had done without knowing that she had—in part, at any rate—succeeded in catching and reproducing something of its eerie quality. But what was totally unexpected was the simplicity and seriousness of his praise. It was quite clear that

he judged and appreciated her performance by no kindly, indulgent standard set up by the professional for the amateur. She stopped halfway across the room.

"You don't mean that?" she asked.

Harry got up from his seat, laughing.

"Louis, I no longer accuse myself of breach of confidence in telling my wife what you said about the pantomime," he remarked. "You have told her yourself now. If in a few months' time I am a forlorn and deserted husband because she can't resist the footlights, it will be your fault."

Grey turned to him.

"My dear fellow, what do a few deserted husbands matter in comparison to the gain to the world of an actress? How self-centred you are!"

But Eleanor did not laugh at these farcical observations. She stood quite still; she remained perfectly grave.

"But do you mean what you said, Mr. Grey?" she asked.

"I should be very imperceptive if I did not," he answered. "You were admirable: you *were* the Rat-Wife."

Harry laughed again at his wife's stillness and gravity. "Darling, don't take it too much to heart," he said. "I am the scratching things which you are to send out to sea and drown."

Eleanor's hair had got a little dragged down over her face by the cloak, and she pushed back a great heavy coil of it.

"Oh, Harry, don't!" she said. "Mr. Grey, I am pleased. I should like to shout, or laugh, or cry—I don't mind which."

She paused a moment. His assurance of her excellence, gravely delivered, had literally rather stunned her, like a blow, while for the dancing stars and lights produced by the blow she had the renewed vision of her own girlish dreams and aspirations. It was as if, for her own amusement, she had written a story, and suddenly some critic had solemnly told her that she was a born novelist, had pronounced that she could build, and had built in sober fact, that which was to her but a castle in the air; had declared her castle habitable. Then suddenly she felt that her mouth and throat had become quite dry, and, taking a step forward, she poured herself out a glass of water from the still uncleared dinner-table, spilling the half of it on the cloth.

"I am thirsty," she said.

Grey watched her with more than an inkling of what was passing in her mind. He had not said a word more than he meant, but for the moment he wondered whether he had not

better have said nothing, beyond banal words of appreciation. He remembered quite distinctly his talk with Harry after the pantomime, his unwillingness to let his own commendation reach the girl; but he remembered also that he had said that no amount of discouragement will keep the real artist from the exercise of his gift. Since then Eleanor had married, and he supposed, in so far as the subject had ever occurred to him, that her nature had sought the outlet which all strong natures demand in the normal path of wifehood. But now to-night, if he correctly read the reason for her stillness and gravity, all the artistic passion in her was still groping towards its fulfilment.

He had seen her constantly during this last month or two, and it was for that very reason (since change going on before our eyes is so imperceptible) that he had not noticed how she was growing in womanhood and development. Her natural gaiety and childlike enthusiasm in the joy of life had made him think of her as a girl still, but at this moment, when his simple words of praise had stirred her, he saw to what depths she was stirred. There was a tremendous lot there, lying below the glittering surface. She had developed also physically; the small pale face now, as she drank the water, was capable of more than the naïve evidence of pleasure—it could be capable of tragedy, perhaps. . . .

All this went through his mind with the instantaneousness of newly-received impressions, and as soon as she had drunk her wineglass of water she spoke again, as if the draught had washed out some stain of trouble from her mind, leaving it unclouded again.

"Oh, what fun parlour-tricks are!" she said. "I think it's your turn, Mr. Grey. Can't you play a tune on the finger-glasses? Or shall Harry do his big trick now? I wonder where we shall be most comfortable for the reading. Darling, is your room more than usually untidy? If not, we might go there, because you and Mr. Grey can smoke all the time, and I as often as I choose, without saturating the drawing-room in tobacco."

It was settled, after inspection, that Harry's room was not more than usually untidy, which left conjecture baffled as to the lengths to which untidiness could go, and, by the simple expedient of putting whatever happened to be on the chairs designed for occupation on to the floor, space was found for the three. Harry occupied a big stuffed basket-chair close

underneath an electric lamp. By his side was a small table, on which was his manuscript. A long glass, filled to the brim, stood there likewise.

He had bargained for an absence of technical criticism until the reading of all the three acts was over, and at the end of the first and second acts Eleanor and Louis Grey, at his suggestion, behaved like "stupid people in the stalls," and chatted together; for he held that the opinion of the stalls was valuable in the same way as was the opinion of Molière's housemaid, and certain of their remarks he jotted down. Then, after a pause for the refreshment of the reader, he went on again, and it was already close on midnight when the last page was turned. Then Grey vigorously clapped his hands.

"It's good, Harry," he cried; "and it's a beauty for construction. But I don't prophesy for it the raging popular success of the other.

"Ah! And Nellie will tell you why."

Louis turned to her.

"I feel certain you can," he said.

"Unsympathetic heroine," said Eleanor. "She is nice, really—I know that; but she's got a crust on. Oh, Mr. Grey, do persuade him to remove it! She's not genial in little ways, and little ways are so big."

He nodded.

"Yes; that's it," he said.

Harry groaned.

"As if I hadn't tried to make her genial!" he exclaimed. "But the Creature won't be genial. She is like that. I'm not responsible for her, though I suppose I did tell you about her in the play. But that's what she is! You might as well make the Rat-Wife genial!"

He got up from his chair and poured himself out a glass of whisky-and-soda.

"Jove! I'm thirsty," he said, "with all that jawing. Hang it! that's the end of the whisky. Hope there's some more in the house."

"None for me, thanks," said Louis.

"But for me. You're going off to-morrow, you say, and I must have a good talk over this all first with you. Now, you and Nellie are quite right in one way, but quite wrong in another. You say she is not genial; no more she is. If she was genial it would have to be another play. You may ask me to write another play if you wish, but you can't have

this play with a milk-of-human-kindness heroine going on her rounds. Besides, Miss Anstruther, whom I take it you intend to be the leading lady, isn't kind. She couldn't be kind, dear thing. You might as well want the wild cat at the Zoo to be kind! It wouldn't be a wild cat if it was."

The fresh decanter of whisky had come, and he refilled the glass. The exertion of this long recital, which he had given them with tremendously vital dramatic utterance, and the excitement of it, had given him a kindled eye and an unusual colour; he was flushed and glowing with his efforts, and his words came headlong from his mouth, vivid and picturesque.

"It isn't I who write the play at all," he said, "and there's the fact of the matter. Something inside my brain—I assure you it is so—over which I have no control, writes it all. Else, why shouldn't I be able to write when I want? Nellie will tell you that often I've sat here by the hour together, pen in hand, willing and eager to begin, and nothing happened; except occasionally some dreadful slack twaddle of talk which the Uncontrollable tore up as soon as it took charge of the job again. It doesn't care two straws whether I'm fresh or tired, inclined to work or disinclined; when it begins to dictate to me—it's no less than that—I have to put it down, otherwise I should burst. It's a sort of possession—it is, really. And since the Uncontrollable says that Stella is a bit of a cynic and a cat, cynic and cat she has got to be. If you like I'll rewrite it without the help of the Uncontrollable, and you can have it performed at all the Mothers' Meetings and girls' schools in the kingdom. It will make them all go to sleep with the sheer torpidity of it. They can say a line or two of it over their tea, and the tea will be impregnated with the sugar of it. And you're going away tomorrow, Louis! How long can you give me to-night to talk it over with you?"

Louis looked at the clock.

"It's half-past twelve," he said, "and my train starts in ten and a half hours. I can give you nine hours if necessary, and then I must go home and pack. But if you give me the manuscript, I believe I can tell you in half an hour all the points that strike me as wanting attention."

Eleanor got up.

"Then I think I shall leave you and Harry, Mr. Grey," she said. "Poor dear, I've made all my criticisms often enough

to him! Good-night, and a delightful holiday to you! I have your word that you will come to see us as soon as you get back."

After she had left them, Louis Grey began to run through the play again. After some five minutes' silent reading he looked up.

"You said that one of the reasons why Stella must be a cat is that you think of Miss Anstruther as playing the part," he said. "Now, I think that is a pity. You had her in your mind so vividly that it influenced the character. Can't you banish Miss Anstruther from your mind?"

Harry was lying back in his chair, but sat up quickly as Louis spoke.

"Ah, but it isn't only Miss Anstruther," he said; "it's the Uncontrollable."

"Which, I assure you, is nothing else than your subconscious mind."

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"Surely you must have heard of it. It's the mind that directs what we call instinct and habit."

"Habit?" asked Harry. "By Jove!"

"Yes, and does all the unconscious thinking that goes on within all day, and probably all night. What you have done is to let your unconscious mind dwell on the thought of Miss Anstruther in the character, and in consequence all that Stella says comes out coloured with—with Anstrutherine. Now, can't you think of anyone else as Stella instead of her, and with that same someone else in your mind go very carefully through her lines again? You have told me you always visualize your characters acting. It might be worth trying; I believe all sorts of little genial touches would suggest themselves. There's nothing in the plot of the play which demands Anstrutherine."

"I'll try anything within reason," said Harry; "and that sounds reasonable. Go on; tell me who I am to think into the part instead."

Louis smiled; the character of Stella in all but its want of geniality had reminded him very strongly of someone he knew and Harry knew. He wondered if it had struck him.

"You won't have to go very far afield, will you?" he asked.

"Ah, you see the likeness, too," said Harry. "It's quite true. Stella is tremendously like Nellie in most ways—like a sour Nellie. By Jove!—and he broke off suddenly as his

mind with its keen alertness tackled the idea. He got up quickly.

"You mean," he said, speaking excitedly—"you mean that I am to say to my Uncontrollable—unconscious mind, you called it, didn't you?—that Stella is Nellie, and with that fixed, go through the part again. Well, let's see what happens. Stella is Nellie; Stella is Nellie. Give me the first act and let me begin. But what an awful experiment! Supposing it means that I have to pull the whole play to bits again? Anyhow, give it me; I want to begin at once. I feel —I feel there might be something to be done."

Louis laughed at this volcanic impetuosity.

"Just wait ten minutes," he said, "until I've run through it for the other points I want to talk about. I'm off to-morrow; you can do the rest after I have gone."

"Then I'll just go and say good-night to Nellie," he said. "Lord knows when I shall get to bed! All I know is that I shall begin on it after you've gone. I believe I might do something with it."

Eleanor had got to bed when he went to her room, and admitted him with surprise.

"Has Mr. Grey gone already?" she asked. "Are you coming to bed?"

"No, darling, neither," said he. "And when he goes, my work begins. He's got an idea, and I'm going to see if it will work. I'm going to go through Stella's part, imagining it is you. I'm going to see if I can't work a little geniality into it—make her sympathetic."

She sat up, propped by her pillows, and he came close to her, folding his arm round the pyramid of her updrawn knees. Her arms were bare to above the elbow, her nightgown open at her neck, so that he could see the soft swell and ebb of her bosom, and the sweet, subtle fragrance of her body hung round her, faint and elusive.

She smiled at him, laying her arm on his.

"Ah, how proud I should be if you made Stella sympathetic because you were thinking of her as me!" she said. "But surely, dear, you are not going to work to-night. It is so late already."

"I know; but I think the spirit is going to move me," he said. "The Uncontrollable feels in working order."

He put the fingers of his other hand into the crook of her elbow, gently stroking the skin.

"It's a bore—an awful bore," he whispered, "and I hope the Uncontrollable didn't hear me say that. But I must work if I find I can. I only just left Louis, who is going through the first act again, to come to say good-night. Don't lie awake, darling, but get to sleep. I may be ever so late."

"I'm not sleepy," she said, smiling back at him; "I'm ever so wide awake."

"I shall say good-night all the same," he said. "I may go on working till any time. I must go back to Louis now. By Jove! what a success your Rat-Wife was!"

"Oh, Harry, I am so excited about it," she said. "Was he really serious?"

"Certain."

He gathered her up in his arms, and kissed her with that eager violence she loved so.

"Good-night! Damn it all!" he said.

He put out her light as he passed back into his dressing-room next door, and she heard him go back to the study.

The room was warm with the fire that had been mended not long before, and yet brisk with the frosty air that came in through the open window, and, watching the play of the light on the walls, she felt, as she had said, very wide awake. All that had happened during the evening tended to excite her and banish sleep—her own success with the Rat-Wife, Louis Grey's appreciation of Harry's play, and perhaps above all the knowledge that before long he would be busy at it again, with herself as model, putting kindliness and geniality into the unsympathetic heroine. It seemed to her, it is true, a somewhat hazardous reconstruction, and one that might end in general confusion, or, as he himself had said not so long ago, in the writing of a different play, but the personal share she was to have in it was strangely dear to her. How he could manage it she had no idea, but she had long ago learned that the workings of that brilliant wayward mind of his were entirely outside her ken. Often during the past month he had plumbed the depths of despair at dinner-time, saying that, though he had often struck and grounded on the shallows before, never had he come to such an unnavigable passage as this. Then, sombrely, he had gone to his room about ten, and she had seen him no more till, on waking in the morning, she had found him by her sleeping heavily and deeply. Groans of the tortured or the dying would accompany his tardy waking, and, in answer to inquiries, "Oh, it went as smoothly as butter," he

would say. "Can't think what the difficulty was. I am so sleepy."

Eleanor gave a long sigh of sheer content, and spread her arms wide, as if to lay herself open to the happiness and love that made life the wonderful thing it was. Then, so to speak, she fell to picking little separate pieces out of that shining mosaic, and considering them singly. Though they were all set in content, it seemed that each of them was made of desire, and it was just that which gave them their vividness. To begin with, her pleasure in the little scene she had played to-night was largely vivid because the artist's desire for expression, dimmed for a while in the great love-light that had dawned on her, was aglow again. She wondered a little whether it was selfish to care so much for a purely personal achievement, for she was quite honest enough to be aware that her desire to act was due—— And her brain did not trouble to finish the sentence even in thought, for she remembered a phrase of Harry's which entirely expressed it. He had just read her a very finely written little scene in his last play, and at the end, "Oh, jolly fine art," he had said—"particularly because I did it"... particularly because I did it. That was so true. Creation and expansion of oneself! The bringing of fine things into the world, or the interpretation of them, anyhow ... that was what the actor must do. He must be able to see beauty and tragedy and wit, and show them to the world. Yet, as Eleanor felt, she would be immensely content to act, to interpret, without any to watch and admire and criticize. Her own approbation, if she could earn it, would be sufficient wages for her pains. Yet, yet what a glorious thing to impress yourself on others, to hold the rapt theatre, make them unconscious of their physical environment, their wants, their hunger, their private gnawings and scratchings, if only for an hour or two!

Gnawings and scratchings ... she was back at the Rat-Wife again. But, thank God, there was no need for the Rat-Wife's services in this house. There was nothing that gnawed and scratched under floors, or behind wainscoting, or in cupboards. Thank God ... and she suddenly remembered she had not said her prayers.

At the moment an external sound interrupted the swift underground passage of her thoughts, and she heard the door of Harry's room open. She could just catch the murmur of subdued voices in the entry, then the front door of the flat clicked and clicked again, and she heard very quiet steps go

back to the room from which they had come. There was once more the sound of a door gently closed, and silence.

This was all easy to interpret: Harry had gone back to his work after seeing Louis Grey off. He would be alone there now, and she, sleepless, and not wanting to sleep, would have been so much happier sitting in a dressing-gown by the fire, while he worked, than lying here. She almost got up to go to him, but just did not, for he always liked working with no one else in the room. She, as he had told her before, was the least desirable companion, because he could not bring his mind to his work when something so much more intimate to himself was present. She disliked his practice, but she loved the theory of it.

She had not said her prayers, and yet it seemed to her that ever since she had got into bed she had been saying them. Her thoughts about herself, her performance of the Rat-Wife, her rekindled desire to act, had but crossed the flow of her consciousness, as a feather may be blown upstream against a great slow-moving but irresistible current of water. All that occupied her real being was the thought of love—not physical, hardly mortal, though both these were the right and proper by-products of it. God was so clever—there was no hint of profanity in the thought: it was pure childlikeness—that surely He must know how she loved Him for the very fact of her existence. She had forgotten to mention it, it is true, but all that so occupied her in silence sang it aloud. Yet, after all, she thanked other people when they were good to her, although there was no doubt they were aware of her gratitude. Besides, in this case, there was so much she wanted, and whereas it was not polite to ask other people for favours, it was positively wrong not to ask God for them, if you believed in Him.

She folded back her arms, so that her knuckles covered her eyes, and whispered.

"Dear God," she said, "thank you so much. Thank you for everything, for daddy, and for my nice evening, and for Harry's play being so good, and Mr. Grey being so kind. I hope mamma will make daddy very happy, and will you remember Alice, and Elsie, and all of them? I want lots of things. I want to hate, much more than I do, all the things that are horrid, and I want to be only sorry for the people who like horrid things, and not to hate them. That's the difference."

Eleanor paused a moment. Then she turned over, and knelt up in bed. She felt that her position was somehow not polite.

"Dear Jesus Christ," she said, "I am in earnest. I want to be good, and I want to love so much more than I feel possible now. I don't know how to love mamma, for instance. I know she is good, but I can't bear it. About the Aubusson carpet for one thing. I know it doesn't matter, and I want to feel it—I want to understand so much that I hate the motive of. I want to be wise and kind. I want to feel You here always, when I mend the fire, or try to act the Rat-Wife, or eat my dinner, or—or be here with Harry in the dark, loving each other. I want You to be behind it and in it all. I know You are, but I want to realize it. You do let us all go wrong when we don't realize it, but not when we do. But we are feeble people. And I want not to be feeble; I want to hate sin more, not . . . not because of the horrid results, but because You hate it. For Your sake. Amen. Oh, and Harry's father. But thank you most of all for Harry."

The firelight had smouldered out of flame by now, and when Eleanor again lay down there was only a faint red glow on the fender and the immediate circle of its illumination. She felt still very wide awake, and got out of bed to put a few more coals on, since Harry no less than she loved the leap of the flamelight on the walls. Yet even when she thought of him, as she put the new coals on the glowing core, she said to herself: "O, ye fire and heat, bless ye the Lord!" Something dimly realized made all things sacramental.

She got back into bed full of an intimate joy. Everything seemed good: the fact that Harry was working was as good as if he and she had lain here, with the drowsy words of falling asleep together. It was easy to imagine that his pulled-down pillow was his shoulder—that she was falling asleep there. When she woke in the morning he would be there, or before she really awoke she would subconsciously have divined his presence, so that before awaking she would have pillowed herself on him. Sometimes, while she yet slept, she would move, and be half awakened by some readjustment on his part, which further awoke her, to find that he was stirring, and thrusting a shoulder more conveniently for her. Or, still half awake, how often she had guessed at his hand moving quietly, half awake also, about the arm of his sleeping-suit, so that he got free of it, and laid the touch of the smooth skin round her neck. That made some artery in his arm beat close to her ear: with that dear palpable pulse, slow and quiet with the morning beat, she often dozed into complete unconscious-

ness again. It was his heart-beat that made her happy and secure.

The lambency of the mended fire leaped less high on the wall, with periods of quiescence, and, in tune with it, Eleanor's thoughts abated from their springing activities, and soon she passed into the land of blurred consciousness that borders on and melts into sleep. Then quite suddenly she woke again into full possession of herself, roused by a sound that still rang in her ears—namely, the banging of a door. She had no idea how long she had slept, but the room had become quite dark, and, after one moment's startled confusion, she guessed that Harry's work was over. But it was strange of him to bang a door like that at such an hour. The door was evidently that of his dressing-room, for presently she heard him moving about there with an odd shuffling step that was also somehow unlike him. She sat up in bed, and waited, feeling vaguely uneasy, and yet wondering what cause for uneasiness there could be. From her bed she could see a crack of light under the door of communication with his dressing-room.

Before long the noise of his movements ceased altogether, and silence succeeded. Once she called to him, and once again, more loudly, so that he must have heard, but without getting any response. Eventually she got out of bed, and tapped at his door. Then, as she still got no answer, she entered. The room was brightly lit, and he was lying fully dressed, even to coat and shoes, on the bed. His face was upturned towards the light, flushed and open-mouthed.

For the moment she thought to herself, "Poor darling, he has worked himself dog-tired!" Then he opened his eyes and saw her.

"Hullo, Nellie," he said thickly. "Bedtime—is't bedtime? . . ."

There was no possibility of mistake here. A sense of physical repulsion, like sickness, seized her, but next moment she had herself in hand again. Whatever happened afterwards, it was no time now for saying or doing anything except what the mere exigency of his state demanded.

"Yes, lie down," she said. "I am coming back."

She went to her room and fetched a rug, which she put over him, tucking it in round him. He had closed his eyes again and was breathing heavily. With a couple of quick movements she undid his collar, and then spoke again.

"Harry," she said, "if you want anything, call me. I will leave the door open. I will put your lights out."

She got no reply to this, and, after waiting a few moments more, went back to her bed again. She covered her head over with the bedclothes and burst into a passion of sobbing. Repulsion and pity, disgust and unfathomable tenderness, were all mingled together in her tears.

She slept but little, and uneasily, and, in the intervals of tossing restlessness tried to puzzle out the wise and loving course, without arriving at any conclusion that satisfied her. The shock of disgusted surprise which that first sight of him had given her must first be put away ; she could not deal with a thing if she shrank from it. But that was not so difficult, for, real and justified though her disgust was, her love for him, which lay behind it, was incomparably more vital. But more than love was needed ; she had to be wise as well. It was certain, she felt, that he would be heartily sorry for what he had done, but she felt also that it would be no use behaving to him as if his penitence was sufficient reason for dismissing the affair. Now, too, that she had been actually confronted with him in that state, she felt terribly certain that this was not the first time he had been like that. It was impossible not to let her mind establish a connection between what she had seen and the memory of those days—and there had been not a few of them—when he had slept late, heavily, and had been dull-eyed and yellow-faced all the morning. Or—with a qualm of sickening fear she thought of his father, and shuddered. What she hoped was that Harry would open the subject himself ; she could not bear to think that the accusation might have to be brought by her. If he denied it, what on earth was she to do ? If he said that he had only been utterly tired out, and had just dropped asleep on his bed ? It was scarcely credible that he should do that, but until a few hours ago it was equally incredible that he should have got drunk like that.

Then for a few ineffectual moments she tried to persuade herself that she was making altogether too much of it. Horrid though it was, she knew that men occasionally did get drunk, that fifty years ago many habitually got drunk, but there was no solidity of comfort here. It was hateful in itself, and in his case terribly dangerous. Then, again, all her disgust, all her sense of danger, well-founded as it was, was swallowed up in simple pity.

She looked in again on him while she was dressing, and found him still asleep, but during the night he had taken off his clothes, and was lying in bed with one arm, as was

usual with him, outside the counterpane, with sleeve rolled back to the elbow. The blind of his window was drawn up, and an oblong of clear primrose-coloured sun streamed in, making her for the moment half wonder whether the whole affair had not been nightmare.

Then she finished dressing, made but a poor attack on breakfast, and went into the drawing-room to attend to her letters, dreading his entry and the interview that must take place. After a little while she heard him go to the dining-room, and presently he came in; her table faced the window, away from the door. She answered quite naturally to his morning greeting, and he sat down in front of the fire, as he so often did, with the paper. Eleanor felt her hands grow cold and damp with the fear that he was not going to speak. Somehow it seemed to her that it would make a tremendous difference if he did. Then she heard the paper rustle as he put it down.

"I did an awful lot of work last night," he said.

She could not open the subject just yet.

"Did you, dear?" she asked. "I am glad. Will you read it to me some time this morning?"

"Yes, rather. Shall I get it now? Or are you busy?"

"No; these letters will do any time," she said.

He did not move, and she went on writing, sick at heart.

"Are you busy, Nellie?" he asked again.

"No, dear; I said I wasn't."

"Then will you attend a minute?"

She laid down her pen."

"Yes," she said.

There was a long moment's silence. Then he spoke.

"I am not sure if you know what I am going to tell you or not," he said, "because I can't quite remember if you—— I got drunk last night."

She got up and sat herself on the arm of his chair. She could not be away from him now.

"Yes, dear, I knew," she said. "I came in and saw you. Oh, Harry, I am so sorry. It was so disgusting to see you like that, and it is so wicked and so dangerous. But I am glad you told me."

He was feeling wretchedly ill and tired this morning; his nerves on edge, his brain fatigued with work, his digestion soured by excess. He got up from his chair, freeing himself from her arm.

"Of course, if you take it like that," he said, "and call me disgusting and wicked, there's no more to be said."

"I never called you disgusting and wicked," she said. "I said that drinking was disgusting and wicked."

"It is the same thing."

"No, dear. It is a totally different thing. You agree with me, too."

For a moment it seemed doubtful which part of him would win in the struggle—that which felt ill and angry or that which felt sorry. But Eleanor did not doubt. She had spoken wisely, or as wisely as she knew how, and it was left for him to be wise, too. Eventually he turned round again.

"Yes, I agree with you," he said.

Her love streamed from her like fragrance; he was enveloped in it. But it was no blind indulgent affection; it would not have been love if it had been that.

"Yes, darling, of course you do," she said. "And of course you are sorry. I don't want you to tell me that. But what more, dear? And what next?"

He sat down again, waiting in his weakness for some sign of weakness on her part, something to comfort him, and cheer him. But there was nothing, and he had to brace himself to his next confession unaided.

"That is not all," he said. "I mean that it wasn't for the first time last night. Perhaps last night I was a bit worse than usual. What I mean is that I have often and often gone to bed more or less like that. Anyhow, I have told you that. You didn't know that?"

"No, I didn't *know* it," said she.

He paused; it had been an effort to say what he had said, and he expected tenderness, admiration, perhaps, at his candour. But the emphasis of her reply startled and hurt him.

"You suspected it, do you mean?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only suspected it last night," she said. "Even then I was ashamed of suspecting it."

He gave a little bitter laugh.

"Don't be ashamed any longer, then," he said. "You were perfectly right."

She was quick to reply to that.

"Oh, Harry, you didn't say that," she said. "It is unsaid."

Somehow she did not feel him close to her yet, and she could not go to him; he must come to her over this.

For a long while he sat there in silence, and it was hard for Eleanor not to break it with comfort for him and words

of encouragement. It was not any hardness in her that withheld them, for she yearned and melted to make things easier for him. But she could not, for his sake, capitulate like that. His surrender had to be complete first.

"Yes, I am sorry I said that," he said at length.

"Of course, of course," said she. "It is unsaid."

But still she would not go a step towards him. He had to come himself. Then she distrusted her wisdom, for with a queer, jerky movement he got out of his chair again.

"Well, I have told you I am sorry," he said. "I have also told you that—that last night was not the first time. I don't know that I have any more to say. I must copy out a good deal of what I wrote last night. I am afraid a lot of it will be illegible. I dare say you will not care for me to read it you. now you know in what state I was when I wrote it."

He meant to hurt her with that, because he felt wicked. And though she showed no sign of it to him, it cut her to the heart.

"That shall be exactly as you please," she said. "I have some letters I must answer, too."

He went out of the room without another word to her, and she returned to her letters. She longed to follow him, to make the advance to him which she knew he would leap at, but her determination was absolutely unshaken. He had to be abased further—not before her, God knew—but before himself. She knew not less than certainly that this was so. Her whole soul beckoned to him, but it was he who had to come.

An hour passed, and she heard him leave his room and come into the hall. For a minute or two he must have stood there, and again she wildly, lovingly beckoned. Then the door of the room where she sat was opened and she looked round, thinking that he was coming to her, as she must have him come. But the door was ajar only, and he stood outside.

"I shall not be in to lunch," he said, and closed it again.

Still she did not flinch from what she knew was right. It was not by making it easy for him that she could help him best, but by standing aloof till he joined her again. Nor was it easy for her to make it difficult for him. Had she cared less, she could have allowed herself to make an appeal to him, to give him pity and consolation and encouragement.

But because she cared so much she must withhold it till he gave himself completely up in order to get it. And she knew how he felt, so well, poor darling! He "lay choking in his pride." Pride before her, too! There was the ludicrous thing,

ludicrous and so natural! For Eleanor was old-fashioned in many ways, and considered man as immeasurably superior to woman.

She had planned a busy afternoon, full of cheerful little necessities. They were going down to Bracebridge in two days, to spend Christmas with her father and a subsequent week at Mrs. Wilkins', and presents had to be chosen. She had to give orders for a delicious combination of squirts of various kinds to be fixed into the bathroom in their absence; also Harry had bidden her to select for herself a Persian kitten, as her own Christmas present, and not ask the price; but she had no heart for any of these things, and after lunch sat in unusual idleness in the drawing-room. The brilliance of the early morning had given place to a dark and cloudy afternoon, and the gloom of an overhead fog made night of the early afternoon. But it did not seem worth while to turn on the electric light, for there was nothing she wanted to do. She was tired of thought, too, for, think over the situation as she might, she could not see that it was possible to do differently. Harry, no doubt, would come in soon, and, if he spoke of indifferent things, she must be natural and normal. If he suggested reading the corrected play to her, she must be interested—as she would be—and critical and appreciative. But there would be a curtain between them; she loathed the curtain, but it must be he who withdrew it. She had thought of nothing else all these hours, but she had to reject, as she had rejected at first, any initiative on her part. He knew she cared: for his own sake he had to show it.

She had sat there in nearly complete darkness for some time before she heard him come in. Then once more the door opened, and he looked in. Her heart sank at the normal cheerfulness of his voice.

"Hullo," he said, "sitting in the dark, Nellie? Shall I turn up——"

He broke off suddenly, and came across the room to her chair.

"Nellie, I am an utter brute," he said.

It was for that indefinable quality of speech that she had been waiting all those hours. Her heart recognized the surrender of it when it came.

"Oh, Harry, Harry," she said, "I knew you would come to me."

He knelt on the floor by her chair, his face cast into dim lights and heavy shadows by the fire.

"I'm damnable," he said. "But I want to tell you——"

"Ah, my dear," she said, "of course you are sorry. Your wanting to tell me was all I wanted."

His honesty endorsed the resolution he had come to—namely, to tell her all, how it appeared that such good work as he did was dependent on these degrading conditions, and something that he told himself was "sparing her" urged him to withhold it.

"But that is not all," he said.

"The—the other times, you mean?" she said. "Harry, dear, I don't think I want to hear about them, as long as you know you made a pig of yourself, and really intend not to be a pig any more. I suppose I ought to scold you, but I know very well by your tone and by everything about you that you have been scolding yourself. Darling, you deserved all the scolding you could give yourself; I do not want to spare you one word of it."

It was getting harder for him every moment. But he made his effort, and with success.

"Oh, it's not only that," he said. "It's much more than that, much more complicated. Now, don't interrupt me, Nellie. It'll be hard enough to get through it at all."

He turned himself about, so that he sat with his face away from her, looking into the fire.

"I don't want to justify myself," he said. "There's nothing to be said for the habit I have got into. But the matter is that I can't write unless I've been drinking. Drink—I don't mean getting drunk—sets something loose in my brain, that which we used to call the elf or the Uncontrollable. And when it's loose—very often just one whisky-and-soda sets it loose—I get so keen about my work, that I just must keep it loose. And that means drinking more. So it goes on, I drinking instinctively and working, utterly happy because I know I am doing good work, and that the best part of my brain is active. You remember my reading you 'The Dilemma' in the schoolroom at the Wilkins'? And how you put your finger on certain bits of slack stuff? All that, just that, and nothing else, was written without—without help. All that you thought good was written with help. Often for a week together I determined to have no help. In consequence I did no good work. Of course, it was a rotten plan to trifle with such methods at all, but it was so easy to persuade myself that I would just finish this act, or just finish this play, and that then I would give it up. But I am ashamed. I dare say

I shouldn't have been if it hadn't been for last night, and the fact that you know. I've got into a morbid condition; at least I suppose that is what a doctor would say, and at present I do work best under this beastly stimulant. But that can't be right; a healthy brain would certainly work best when it is clear. Most of the fellows who do good work, I suppose, do it in the morning, after a good night's rest. That's about all, I think."

There was no question any more in Eleanor's mind how to act. The wise course, now that Harry had told her everything, was quite certainly identical with the loving one. She leaned forward, and drew back that dear head, and kissed him.

"Oh, Harry, what—what a hell of a time you must have had!" she said. "I am so sorry, but I do wish you had told me sooner. I wish you had told me at once, before we married. Then I might have helped you at the beginning, and you might have been spared it all."

"But I had to write 'The Dilemma,'" he said. "It was only by writing it, and making it as good as I could, that it could have a chance of success. And without that how could I have got you? Don't you see?"

Eleanor gave a long sigh.

"Oh, it would have been lovely if you had told me right away at the first," she said. "I should have understood, I think."

She gave a little quiet tender laugh.

"To be sure, you would have had to have said, 'I love you, and I want to write a good play so that I can marry you, and I can't write a good play unless I get drunk,' and I allow it would have been a rather surprising speech. But I think I should have understood. You see, darling, I loved you, too. That makes one better able to understand. Anyhow, I understand now."

"And what's to be done now?" he asked.

She laughed again. His question must have ueeq humorously intended.

"As if you didn't know!" she said. "Of course, I'll do it, too, and think what a lot of money we shall save! Not one single drop of alcohol of any sort for either of us. We shall think with green jealousy of servants with their beer-money because they can get beer with it, and we can't. And when that tiresome elf of yours has come to his senses, and finds that he works best when he is most clear-headed, you will uot

want it; you will dislike it, because you are at your best without it."

Eleanor gave this facile outline with her usual optimistic enthusiasm, as if the object was already attained.

"It is rather drastic," said he.

"Yes, dear, because that is the only way to deal with tendencies you are determined to get over. Oh, of course, it will be hard for you. You must expect that, Harry."

"And if I find I can't work?" he asked.

"But, of course, you will find that you can't work at first," said she. "Otherwise there would be nothing to conquer and get over."

"And if still I can't work?" he said. "If it goes on for ever?"

Eleanor knew well the folly of imagining difficulties ahead; even if, in reality, they proved to be there, it was no use losing heart at them before they had to be dealt with.

"Ah, Harry," she said, "of course, we shall have to be patient. But never use up your patience before you feel inclined to be impatient. When difficulties come, it is time to be patient and firm and wise. Till then, it is best not to think about them. You see, you are absolutely determined not to let this habit close in on you. That is all that matters this moment. Kiss me, you poor dear darling. That's right. Now I shall go and tell them to make some lemonade for dinner."

He burst out laughing at this.

"Tell them not to make it too strong," he said.

CHAPTER X

About a fortnight later Harry Whittaker was sitting in what had been the schoolroom of the Vicarage at Bracebridge, as dusk began to close in on Christmas Eve. Eleanor had gone out walking with her father after lunch, and, since this was an institution, so he gathered, that was of the nature of a rite (for Eleanor had before now made reference to "our Christmas Eve walk, daddy") he had announced a fine and independent intention of stopping indoors and doing some work. He had been doing some work all the afternoon, and at the moment he was tired of it. The work he had done was entirely represented by a blank sheet that lay in front of him, and a couple of dozen torn-up pages, some half-written, some with only a line or two on them, that lay in crumpled balls in the waste-paper basket. To-day, in fact, had been a repetition of the last fourteen days, and the last fourteen days, in consequence, had not been very exhilarating. And each day as it passed was rich in its own depression, as well as in the cumulative effect of those that had gone before. They were not beginning to get lighter; they were, on the contrary, becoming increasingly more weighty.

It was not only that a mental fever to work possessed him, but he knew that within his brain there was all he wanted to write, while the road to it he himself, by virtue of his resolution, had made impassable, but he longed and craved for drink in itself, for the general serenity and exhilaration it produced. In a way, however, that craving, though it gnawed and disquieted him, was of the nature of a safeguard, for he knew that the acuteness of his desire was proportionate to the danger of its gratification. About that he had no illusion; if he was to break the habit and quench the strength of his weakness, he was conscious that Eleanor was right, and that it must be done by drastic measures. Sometimes, it is true, he tried to persuade himself that all he wanted was that moderate allowance of drink that the vast majority of mankind indulge in without danger or damage, but, until

that craving he had for it ceased, he knew that he must not consider himself to belong to the vast majority of mankind in these respects. Thus, though the desire for drink, for its own sake, was acute, his refusal to yield to it was unshaken. He was quite honest at this moment in telling himself that as far as that alone was concerned, he was perfectly able to cope with his craving. But more than that was concerned, for here was the play, which had to be altered and amended by the time that Louis Grey came home, and hitherto, after that first long night of work, which led to his struggle against habit, he had not done anything whatever to it. But it had to be done; somehow or other in the next fortnight it must be made ready, for he had received a solid sum in advance upon it, and had promised that his work would be complete by the end of the first week in January.

His mind went back to that particular evening, when, after Eleanor had gone to bed, he and the actor had sat together for a couple of hours going over the weak points, discussing the means whereby the play could be more closely knit, more dramatically marshalled. These explanations and discussions had been perfectly clear to him at the time; he saw the points that Louis Grey made, and at the time there seemed to him to be no difficulty in effecting them. By far the most difficult of the changes that had to be made was the introduction of geniality into the character of the heroine. He had thought of her as Miss Anstruther; it had been decided that he was to think of her as Eleanor, and in the three hours that night that had followed, after Grey had left him, he had worked with zest and success on this most difficult and delicate transformation. Now all that he had done stood in confusion, for he could not finish the rest. Apart from that, there were two short scenes that, as had been agreed between them, required rewriting, not revising merely, but rewriting. They had to be conceived and executed differently. At the most a half dozen pages of manuscript was all that was required, but those few pages had to be created, not modelled again. As far as mere manual work went, he had since that night been a pattern of industry, sitting at his desk morning and evening, with every intention to produce the right stuff; but the right stuff simply refused to arrive. And this afternoon, as he sat in the dusk, after a couple of hours of fruitless endeavour, it seemed to him that it never would arrive. The dismal feeling of certainty on that point produced a sort of crisis.

He had been a fool, so he told himself—a fool, hasty and

greedy, on that night. If only he had then stopped work an hour sooner he would not have arrived at that sottishness of inebriation. Next evening, that is to say, he would have worked again, have stopped before he became helpless, and a few such nights would have enabled him to finish the play. As it was, he had drunk—and worked—to the point of detection. Eleanor had caught him. He did not accuse her of trying to catch him. Simply, he had overstepped the limits of moderate intoxication, and she, awake, by ill-luck, had seen him. To make matters worse, so it appeared to him at this moment, he had been frank with her, and told her the whole truth. He wished he had not. It would have been far better if he had done the imperative work on the play, and then, as he was still quite willing and anxious to do, totally abstained, as he was doing now, till he had conquered the craving. To do that was the vital affair; he believed he realized that as keenly as she did. He had no sympathy with his desire; it appeared to him brutish and piglike. He intended and desired to conquer it, but he had to finish his play. Already Louis Grey had paid him a thousand pounds for it, on account of the royalties he would receive; but he had earned nothing till he had finished it on the definite scheme which they had talked over. On the other hand, he had received the money, and had spent a little of it. On that side, anyhow, he had incurred a moral obligation, and up till now all that he had to show of its fulfilment was a waste-paper basket. The plethora there gave evidence of his efforts not of to-day only, but of a fortnight of ineffectual hours, but as to the results of his efforts, blank paper was the unsupported testimony.

It was useless to attempt anything more just now, for his brain was tired with the repeated failure that fatigues so much more than the effort on which success blossoms, and the pit of his dejection rose, smooth-walled, high above his head. It was a good thing to persevere, but what if perseverance remained, as it had hitherto done, entirely barren? Barren, however, it must not remain, since he had promised certain work by a certain date, and with a grim determination—though he had, the moment before, told himself that any further effort just now was useless—he lit the candles and for the twentieth time wrote down "Enter Stella" at the top of his page. She entered; there she was. Now she had to speak.

Yes, yes; faintly an idea shone in his brain, dim, like

distant summer lightning; but then—— Then there came on the door of the room a smart, eager knock.

He laid down his pen.

"Come in," he said.

Mrs. Ramsden entered brightly. The schoolroom had been assigned to him as his study by her kindness; it was to be his room as privately as his own room in the flat, and no one might enter without his permission.

"Pray, Harry, don't let me disturb you," said she; "but as the servants are so busy I thought I would just look in to mend your fire for you and draw the curtains. Don't get up; I should never forgive myself if I thought I was interrupting you. You will be all cosy in a minute. Don't speak; don't think of speaking. I am just the housemaid."

She advanced eagerly to the window, rattled down the blind, and, with a jingling of their rings, swept the curtains together. It was impossible to sit still and not speak, as he had been told to do.

"Oh, thank you so much," he said; "but, indeed, I can do it myself."

Mrs. Ramsden paused.

"Now I am really distressed," she said. "I have interrupted you, and I wanted just to go in and out like the housemaid. Will you have some tea here, Harry, so that you can work on undisturbed? Shall I bring you some tea? Eleanor and her father have just come in, and tea will be ready in five minutes. Let me bring you some here!"

It was all he could do to be polite in answer to those amazing hospitalities. For the last ten days, ever since he and Eleanor had arrived, he had been the object of Mrs. Ramsden's sedulous attention; she was always wondering whether this or that household arrangement would not disturb Harry's work, or whether he would not like dinner a quarter of an hour (or, say, ten minutes) later, in order to get in a full two hours' writing after tea. Yet it seemed to him transparent that Mrs. Ramsden did not even like him. She was only doing her duty colossally.

But he declined her offer with fair cordialty, and she hurried downstairs again. . . . Enter Stella. . . . Enter Stella. . . . And then the bells of the church just across the garden broke out into cheerful and adjacent clamour. . . . "Enter Stella, Enter Stella," exactly fitted the descending scales, and they announced it with the air of triumphant discovery, as if nobody had ever thought of *that* before.

He pushed the blank page away from him. Somehow or other these two scenes had to be written, for the objections Louis Grey had urged against them as they stood were vital. Also, he had got to finish the remodelling of Stella, and he could do nothing with her except make her enter. And between the irritation at the impotence of his brain and the mocking jangle of the bells, he was on the edge of loss of self-control; he could have screamed or broken furniture in the exasperation of his nerves. Instead, it was time to go down to tea, and Mrs. Ramsden would say, "Two lumps, Harry, or is it one?" She had said that twice a day since they had been here, and he had always replied, "No sugar, thanks." And she would say that her head was going, whereas it was as strong as teak. . . .

Eleanor came upstairs with him after tea, as was her custom, to smoke a surreptitious cigarette. She saw from his brevity and studied politeness in public that he was putting some strong restraint on himself, and forebore to ask if he had made any headway. She was not left long in doubt.

"I've had another encouraging afternoon," he said. "All the afternoon I sat in that damned chair, and what do you think I wrote? 'Enter, Stella'! Pretty good, isn't it? Shall I frame it, and give it you for a Christmas present?"

The bitterness of his tone was not new to Eleanor. She hated him to speak to her like that, but this evening he was overcharged with it.

"Oh, Harry dear," she said, "I am so sorry for you. It is hard, working and waiting——"

"Try it yourself," he said. "Sit down day after day to a thing you know you can do, and find yourself unable to do. You can't say I haven't tried. I should like to see you in my place. It would be interesting to see how you behaved."

Eleanor put down the cigarette he had given her, still unlighted, and, coming over to the fire where he stood, took hold of the lapels of his coat. She felt not the smallest resentment at his rudeness; it was not Harry who was rude; it was his nerves that were rude, a thing as outside of himself as a tooth that ached.

"You know that if it were possible I would take all your discomfort and depression," she said.

"Ah, that is easy to say since I can't give it you," he observed."

"Perfectly easy, dear, because it is perfectly true. And you know it. As regards the other, I wish you would frame

'Enter, Stella,' and give it me for a Christmas present. It would remind me how you tried to be patient and persevering when things were very difficult for you, and how well you behaved."

"I'm behaving charmingly now, aren't I ?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Well, dear, it isn't one of your most brilliant moments," she said. "But no decent woman wants her husband to be smoothed over and polished when she is alone with him. I think that is one of the advantages of being married. You and I can be perfect bears with each other, and it doesn't matter a bit, because we understand. If ever I feel thoroughly depressed, who gets the benefit of it ? Why you, of course."

He looked at her in silence a moment.

"Poor dear Nellie !" he said.

"I'm glad I am dear, but I am not in the least to be pitied."

He jerked his shoulders free of her hands.

"You are to be pitied," he said, "because you think your experiment is succeeding. You think I am going to get all right and produce work on lemonade. I shan't get right. There's something wrong in my brain. Good God ! how I envy the ordinary man whose brain goes on ticking regularly like clockwork all his life long. I want to be wound up, precious often, too. I stop unless I am wound up. I've stopped for a fortnight now. The hours don't strike : nothing strikes. I've got quite nice bells in my brain somewhere, nicer than that damned peal in the church-tower there. But they might as well be dumb-bells instead of bells. By Jove ! there's a mental effort for you. Bells, dumb-bells, do you see ? That's the sort of thing I'm capable of. Why don't you laugh ?"

Eleanor had, during this last fortnight, been through a good deal of similar dreariness. It had tired her, and it hurt her with ever-increasing acuteness. For the first time she faltered.

"Oh, Harry," she said, "I feel so much more like crying." Then she knew she should not have said that. What he wanted was to be braced, not appealed to like that. But before she could remedy her tone, he had broken in.

"Then you don't like your experiment either ?" he asked.

"Ah, you are looking at it altogether in the wrong light, darling," she said, "when you speak like that. Supposing you had something diseased that demanded a painful treatment, which was sure—was sure to result in a cure. Do you suppose I should like seeing you suffer ? In that sense I shouldn't like any experiment. But in spite of that I should

love my experiment—I having persuaded you to undergo the treatment—when I saw you getting better."

"And do you see me getting better?" he asked. "Does my work to-day, 'Enter Stella,' for the twentieth time seem to you full of promise? You talk about it being *sure* to result in a cure. Where do you get your certainty from?"

The smile slanted on her mouth like a ray of sunlight.

"A man cannot become a drunkard if he never drinks," she said. "May I not take that for sure?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"And I show signs of improvement?" he asked.

"No, dear, but you will——"

She broke off suddenly, and trouble stained her voice, sullying its clearness.

"Harry, what would you have me do?" she asked. "Would you, the 'you' that loves me and is loved by me, would you actually choose that I should say to you: 'It does not matter; drink all you will. There is nothing to fear'? If after that you sank, and became, yes, became what your father is, would you not rightly say to me, 'You connived at my damnation'? And what of me? I should have desecrated you, and I should know it. Do you want me to do that? Are you parading your dejection to me in order to make me reconsider whether abstention is wise? If that is your idea, tell me so. Or if you don't trust my judgment, go to any doctor you please, tell him the whole story, and ask his advice, If he says I am taking too serious a view of it, you shall have it your own way. But it would still be against my conviction."

"Oh, doctors, doctors!" said he. "We all know what advice one can get from doctors. One says tobacco is deadly poison, another that meat is, another that wine is, another that a cold bath is, another that a hot bath is. If you will go to a dozen doctors, and cut off from your way of living all that they collectively say is bad for you, there will be nothing left for you but—but to go up in a balloon with no clothes on, and breathe deeply."

She laughed in spite of herself. All his vividness was there.

"And you tell me you can't think, and you can't phrase things!" she said.

"I can't when I sit down to try."

"Ah, go to a doctor, Harry," she said. "There may be some simple nerve-tonic which you want."

"At four shillings a bottle; Scotch. Of course, I'll go to a doctor if you like, but it's no use. He would tell me to do

exactly what you told me. I know that quite well. He would also tell me to occupy my mind with other things. Then I think I should swear. Do you suppose I think of—of Scotch just for my amusement ? Do you think I would rather have this craving than be free from it ?"

He lit his pipe, and inhaled a long breath of smoke.

" There's another thing, Eleanor," he said. " It's this play. Louis comes back in a fortnight's time, and will put it into rehearsal at once. It has to be finished by then. I am bound to that. Judge what chance there is of my getting through with it if I go on as I have been doing ! ' Enter, Stella ' ! That's all of my fortnight's work that will stand up to date, the rest, rightly enough, has been lighting the Vicarage fires for a week past. But it has got to be written."

He sat down sideways to her chair, and looked straight in front of him.

" Ordinarily," he said, " I should think it would take me a couple of evenings' work to complete it, without working very—very copiously. Ordinarily, I mean. And after that I need not try to work again for some weeks. Indeed, I should not be able to ; you know what rehearsals mean when Louis is manager. But there are just about two evenings' work before it can go into rehearsal at all."

Eleanor did not answer. Her common sense, or at any rate what can fairly be called common sense, said, " Let him do it," but something more herself than common sense gave a passionate negative. She could not argue about it ; if she had argued she must have been worsted, but the matter did not seem to her arguable, so clear was the right and the wrong of the matter.

" Do you mean you want my consent ?" she said at length. " Because I can't give it you."

Then common sense mocked and gibed at her. He had said the work would not need to be " copious," and she had taken his meaning. For two nights, that is to say, he would come to bed sleepy and heavy-eyed ; on two successive mornings he would be drowsy and indolent, and the work would be done. Yet, on the other hand, there was danger, for who could tell how much or how little further indulgence might upset the balance of his control altogether ? To-day his control, though sorely tried, was efficient still. After a year's more tampering with it, it might still be efficient, but there was no certainty whether the balance was not already hovering, so that a grain's weight added to the wrong side might give an inclination to it that would eventually prove final.

But his next words showed how he misapprehended this war within her.

"You would not see me," he said, "if—if I was disgusting. I would sleep in the dressing-room."

"Oh, Harry, as if that was it!" she said. "Surely you know it is not that. One is right, and one is wrong: there is the whole of the matter."

"But I have promised to get the thing done. It is wrong if I don't."

"It is not so wrong," said she vehemently. "You have been prevented fulfilling your promise by the cure that was necessary for you. It has been—it is—like illness."

"You speak as if a glass of wine was a wicked thing," he said.

She shook her head.

"No, Harry, I do not," she said, "any more than I say a knife or a revolver is a wicked thing. But it is by them that a murderer may commit his crime. They are innocent things in other hands, but they are dangerous in his. I can't give my consent; I can't sanction your doing what I believe to be morally wrong for you."

"What about the play, then, following your plan?"

"Go on trying. Oh, my dear, don't you see it's by trying that you make your character? A man's character is the sum of his intentions and his choices."

Harry looked at her sharply, then went to the table, and began turning over the leaves of his play.

"Quick, say that again, Nellie," he said. "Why, that's the key to the scene I have been trying to write. Go on; tell me more of what you think about that."

Eleanor sprang up, too, excited, immeasurably pleased. "Heaven send I don't talk nonsense," she said. "Yes, that's what I think; every effort strengthens it, every deliberate failure, every intentional failure weakens it, renders it less able to try. We are sorry, only sorry for people's failures, when they have been committed, but we despise them when they intend to fail."

He scribbled hastily on the sheet on which was written "Enter Stella" then stopped, biting the end of his pen.

"That's a little off the lines," he said. "A man has failed, let us say. It is too late. What do you say to him then? You, a woman, I mean, who loved him."

"It is never too late," said she, groping eagerly after the thought he wanted. He shook his head.

"Copy-book," he said. "Besides, it is too late."

"But it is never too late to try again."

"Never too soon to mend, do you mean? By Jove! that's what I want. Admit the failure, is that it? Look it in the face, and have done with it? Then begin again at once? Yes, that's what I want. Gosh, how easy it sounds now you've said it. Thanks awfully, though. What an ass I was not to ask you sooner. It isn't done yet: don't think that; but it's possible again, I see it's possible. Go away, Nellie."

Eleanor needed no second dismissal, and made a silent, thankful exit. She was more than willing to leave the abstract morality of her position undiscussed, if only he could reinforce his resolution by a practical demonstration that his powers of invention were not determined by alcohol. Long and dreary to her, no less than to him, as this last fortnight had been, she felt that, if only he found his creative faculty not utterly impotent, the gain made these days and their depression short and insignificant. True, the thing was not done yet, but even if food for the paper-basket alone resulted, she would not dream of putting this evening in the cupboard of the dreary days. Hope, at any rate, and a fresh stimulus to try had come to him. The gain was immense, even though it led to no practical result. There was at least a moment of encouragement, the first that had shone on him. For the present, in any case, she refused to contemplate the possibility of further days of frost and blackness. There was thaw in the air; the empty pages had begun to be filled. So with a face of spring she went down to the drawing-room, and in her hand, alas! was the cigarette she had not yet lit. Her unconsciousness of its presence there was as profound as the depths of the Atlantic.

The centre of the room was covered with a white sheet, on which were heaped evergreens and holly, for the Christmas decoration of the house, and her stepmother and Alice were busy pricking their fingers.

"Oh, let me come and help," she cried. "I do feel so Christmassy!"

Mrs. Ramsden had taken to spectacles during this last year, and found that with their aid her sight was as good as ever. She saw the cigarette in Eleanor's hand.

"Eleanor," she said brightly, "would you mind not smoking in the drawing-room? I had no idea, I need hardly tell you, that you smoked at all. Of course, my private views—though, I dare say, you have heard me express them

a hundred times—on the subject of women smoking are immaterial to you, and I have no intention of repeating them; but not in the drawing-room, please, nor before Alice. I am sorry if I seem unreasonable."

Eleanor was covered with confusion as with a cloak, and threw her cigarette into the fire. Mrs. Ramsden, still smiling, nimbly got up from her chair, and covered the odious weed with hot burning coals.

"I don't think the smell will escape into the room," she said; "if it does, we can but open the window and move into the hall. Yes, Eleanor, pray come and help us. You know how welcome you always are when you can spare time for us. I am just making a wreath for the door of Harry's study. I must put plenty of holly into it. Alice, dear, if you are making the wreath for the door of my sitting-room, please give me some of the holly you have put into it. Laurels and yew will be ample for me."

"Oh, that is kind of you!" said Eleanor. "I have just been to see Harry. He has got to work again. I am so happy about it."

"But he has been working all the afternoon, has he not?" asked Mrs. Ramsden. "Of course, Eleanor, you know Harry best; but sometimes the eyes of love are blind, and do you not think he works too hard?"

"He won't now," said Eleanor. "I mean him to take a rest when he has finished his play."

"I think, though I do not wish to alarm you, Eleanor, that he looks far from well."

Eleanor still smiled, as she lashed a sprig of yew to the basis of her wreath.

"I know; the poor old boy has been bothered and worried," she said.

"Not by us, not by any of us, I hope, Eleanor?" interrupted Mrs. Ramsden. "I have given strict orders that his study is absolutely private."

"Oh no," said Eleanor; "by his work only. He had quite a little to do when he came down here, and, thanks to you, complete quiet and privacy; but he *couldn't* get two little scenes written, though they were all planned. But just now I left him much more hopeful."

"Thank you, Eleanor. I was afraid he found us in his way, and it is a great relief to know you do not think we have disturbed him. But there are some things about a writer's life which I find it so hard to understand. If I grasp your

meaning rightly—pray, correct me if I do not—you tell us, that Harry had the scenes quite planned, who was to be there and what was to be done, and yet he could not write them. That is to me most curious. I am sure I could not make up a play if I were to think ever so hard, but I do not see the difficulty of making the characters talk when your play is made up; especially as Harry—very cleverly, I am sure—makes them all speak just like ordinary people."

Eleanor adjusted a piece of laurel on to her wreath. "I think perhaps that is the difficulty," she said. "I mean, it is difficult to make them speak as the ordinary person would speak; that is why 'The Dilemma' was such a good play. It might have happened to anybody."

Mrs. Ramsden drew in her breath with a little hissing sound, that denoted the unlikelihood of its happening to *her*. Tactfully, after having expressed the proper disowning of such a situation, she changed the subject.

"I remember, when I was very much run down one year after Easter," she said, "Dr. Harris recommended me a couple of glasses of Burgundy at lunch. I do not usually touch wine, though I am glad to say I am not so narrow as to think that it may not be of use medicinally. I know your father has some excellent Burgundy; I will ask him to open a bottle this evening, and press Harry to have a glass. Though I do not understand what it is he finds so difficult in his play, I see that he looks rather run down, and as he, like I, does not touch wine ordinarily, a couple of glasses of Burgundy might do him as much good as they did me."

Eleanor dropped her wreath.

"Oh, please don't," she said. "Harry has quite given up wine, and he finds it suits him so much better. It is very kind of you, mamma, and—and I am sure Harry would like it, but indeed it doesn't suit him; indeed, it doesn't."

The church bells broke out again at the moment, and Eleanor heard the scoop of a chair in the room directly above, where Harry was working.

"But it stimulates the mind also," said Mrs. Ramsden. "I remember so well how quickly and easily I worked after I had followed Dr. Harris's directions, whereas before I used to find it difficult to concentrate my mind. I was writing a little address for the Guild of St. Mark, and it came quite easily, though I had had but little practice in English composition. It seemed to flow. Had it not been that the funds of the Guild were very low at the time, they would probably have printed it."

This pleasing reminiscence took her mind for the moment off the subject of the famous Burgundy, but she recaptured that thread, and instantly tied a hard knot in her pocket-handkerchief.

"For the Burgundy," she said; "and, I'm sure, a glass of it would do no harm to any of us after our work to-day. There, my wreath is finished, and, upon my word, it is just dressing-time. And here is Harry, who, I am sure, has been working as hard as any of us. Harry, the room does not smell of tobacco, I hope."

Harry sniffed earnestly and energetically. There was an alertness about him that Eleanor had looked for in vain during the last fortnight.

"No, it smells of shrubberies," he said. "Which of you have been smoking? You all look guilty."

Mrs. Ramsden laughed with curious lack of merriment. The idea of women smoking was hardly a subject on which to weave jests, though that depended a little on the jester. Her father, for instance, before now, had said to his guests after dinner and the passage of the wine, "Shall we join the ladies at their cigarettes?" and the remark, when repeated to her, seemed to be really witty; but that was because neither in the dining-room nor anywhere else in his house were cigarettes permitted. In this case, Eleanor had actually brought a cigarette into the room; there was too much tragedy below the surface to allow comedy within speaking distance. So the situation was fully explained to him.

"I cannot break Eleanor of the horrid habit," he said. "Nellie, I'm getting on."

This was not happy either. Mrs. Ramsden assumed a face of fine tenderness.

"Dear Eleanor," she said, "of course it is only to be expected that my wishes should no longer have any weight with you, but as Harry wishes you not to smoke. It must be so bad for you, too. Think of what Harry did himself, when he gave up all wine, as you told me, because he thought he was better without it."

Harry turned quickly to his wife, not pausing to consider how hopelessly impossible his suspicion was. "Have you been talking about that?" he said quickly and low. "You can't have."

Eleanor looked at him, then at Mrs. Ramsden, who was vividly attentive. From what she knew of her stepmother, she was sure that her mind was always ripe for suspicion.

"Mamma was saying you looked tired, Harry," she said, "and very kindly suggested that you should have some Burgundy at dinner, which once did her a great deal of good. I told her that you had found that wine did not suit you."

"Oh, I see. But it is very kind, and I should immensely like a glass of Burgundy, to congratulate my brain on having woke up again."

Mrs. Ramsden untied the knot in her handkerchief. It was so tight that her strong, rather prominent teeth were brought into use.

"James shall give us a bottle," she said. "I will ask him now."

Eleanor and her husband lingered behind a minute after she had gone, and Alice, like a tall, blond lamb, decked with sacrificial wreaths, went to erect their labours.

"Oh, Harry, as if I could have!" she said. He was ready enough with his regret, keenly felt but instantly swallowed up.

"I know, it was absolutely absurd of me," he said. "Oh, Nellie, the play has started again, and went beautifully till those—those blessed bells began. I say, I have persevered, haven't I? I've broken the back of it, too. I've waited until the Uncontrollable came again without help."

"And you're going to reward your perseverance at dinner?" she asked.

"Yes. Why, the thing's done. Besides, after all this Burgundy talk, and my silly speech to you, Mrs. Ramsden might—might think it odd if I didn't. She thinks things odd very quickly."

There was just enough reason in this to make Eleanor waver.

"Yet I would sooner you didn't, dear," she said; "but I don't want to be foolish. Oh, Harry, you look a different person in the last hour."

"But I am," he said.

It was the same different person who went back when the others retired for the night to the schoolroom, alert and eager to work. The whole smothering burden of his intellectual impotence had been removed, and, by this fortnight's refusal to stimulate his brain artificially, its normal activity, which he had lost carelessly, though, perhaps, culpably, had come back to it. How wise had been Eleanor's drastic measures! how negligible, if he had been allowed to

foresee the speed with which they cured him, had the discomfort of the cure been. Before he went down to dinner, he had returned to this room to read over what he had written, and to see if the Uncontrollable had indeed awoke again, and it appeared to him beyond question that it had. At dinner he had taken a couple of glasses of Burgundy and found that afterwards, when Mr. Ramsden indulged in his usual moderate allowance of port, it was possible to look on without sense any longer of craving privation, of desire to pour out a tumblerful and drain it, and, though he longed to be back at his work again, the hour or two after dinner was passed without chafing, so sunlit an affair was it to feel himself capable again; then, as once before, he had told Eleanor that he would probably be very late.

"And don't think I even want the beastly stuff," he said; "whereas, how I have raged before to see your father drinking port. He didn't even offer it to me to-night, as I never take it, and I didn't want it. By Jove, wasn't that Burgundy good, too! Nellie, I shall have two glasses of Burgundy once a week for the future. I shall! Now, good-night, you darling—you darling!"

He went back to his room, settled himself at his table, and began to write. Half an hour was sufficient to finish, and finish with the first of the two scenes that had to be rewritten, and with the same sense of power and certainty he took up the delicate work of remodelling the character of Stella. It had to be made kind, to be lit with geniality; it had to be Eleanor. The action of the play was outside it: it was only that the events happened to a woman round whom sunshine hovered instead of frost. And to-night even this difficult transformation seemed easy. He heard Eleanor's voice in the little interpolated sentences that meant so much. Sometimes, as he thought a phrase over to himself, Eleanor's voice, which rang in his head, would refuse to echo it. Then he tried another; again, perhaps, she refused, but at a third attempt, made not dully and hopelessly any longer, but with the certainty that what he wanted was accessible, he heard her again.

The house was perfectly still. When he had come upstairs, Mr. Ramsden had gone to his study, where they usually sat together before bedtime, over a pipe for the one, and a glass of whisky-and-soda for the other; but an hour ago, in one of his rare conscious moments, Harry had heard him go upstairs, past the room where he sat, and along the passage

beyond. Nothing could come to disturb him, and time was of no account. He could work till morning, and would, if this fair wind continued. Perhaps, even, he might finish to-night. If not, since there was still a fortnight before the rewriting must be finished. there would be other evenings as rapturous as this in front of him.

Midnight had struck long before, but it seemed to him, when the next single hour stirred the air, that the twelve strokes had hardly ceased to vibrate. With deliberate intention, he laid down his pen for a minute, and let himself realize how momentary this hour had been. It had gone in one flash of achievement ; flowed away like honey dripping in a string from the spoon, while below, to show its passage, lay the annotated pages, like the little curled sausages of the flowing honey. That was a good image, not useful for his present purpose, it was true, but still worth remembering. Everyone, who had anything of the child left alive in him, would recollect the nurse helping him to honey or treacle . . . fascinating little curled sausages of honey, melting into the pool of honey already there. . . . Then he heard in his head Eleanor saying it : " Oh, it's like being helped to honey ; the string of honey that goes on to the plate." . . . And he turned to his work again.

He could not catch the thread of it at once. Twice and three times he tried to capture the mood. Somehow the mood was not close to him now ; it had moved off from him, like a shunted truck. Or was it like the string of honey that had broken ? A shunted trunk on a broken string of honey ? Which was it like ? In one case the spoon was suspended ; in the other the engine pulled away again.

Some connection was broken, anyhow ; it must be mended. Perhaps, if he read over the last page or two, he would take the thread up again. Yes, yes . . . that was all very good. But what next ? A few moments ago he knew. Now he knew no longer. It was impossible to leave his work like this. If only he could feel the thread in his fingers again he would be satisfied. Stella had got to be like Eleanor. She had to be kind, genial, and Eleanor's voice, ringing in his head, had to say the speeches ; but Eleanor's voice was no longer there. He felt like a cut-off listener at the telephone, like a shunted truck, like a plate on to which the flowing honey drips no longer. Once let him establish the connection again, he would be so much more than content with his night's work.

By his inner sense of time, the hour should have struck

again, and he looked at his watch, to find that but a quarter of it was past. Then be began to remember other things ; there was a book he had left in Mr. Ramsden's study, which he had meant to take upstairs. Perhaps a little expedition there, with movement and change, might recall what he had lost.

He took his candle and tiptoed downstairs. On the table was the book he wanted, on the table also was what also he wanted. There was no struggle, because within him there was no resistance. He poured out half a tumbler of spirits, filled it to the top with soda-water, and drank it in three gulps. As he drank he told himself that his habit was broken, and that there was nothing to fear. There was still half a glass of soda-water in the syphon ; he was rather thirsty, and thought he would drink that. But soda-water, soda-water . . . if it had been lemonade it would have been different ; there was a certain crispness even about lemonade. As it was . . . and the spirit mounted swiftly to his head, now unaccustomed to it. Very quietly he went upstairs again, his hand starving for his pen. All that had been broken off remended itself. He knew exactly what he had forgotten.

For another half hour he wrote brilliantly, the handwriting a little blurred from haste. Eleanor's voice rang in his head, like a remembered song. All the little additions and revived sentences seemed said by her. Then his pen dropped from his hand ; but it was not the dulled brain that dropped it, it was the Uncontrollable that had finished. He knew the feeling quite well. He sat there a little while longer, in that strangely acute, imaginative mood that accompanies semi-intoxication. He saw he had made a great mistake in seeking help ; he would certainly not seek it again. Of that he was quite determined. So—so it was useless to distress Eleanor. Had there been danger of doing it again, he would have told her—confessed, been sorry ; but since there was no danger, it was inflicting gratuitous worry on her to tell her. He quite agreed with her drastic measures, and meant to obey them. Besides, the Uncontrollable had come into working order again, before he resorted to them. One night's work more would finish this belated business of the play.

He went gently upstairs, undressed, and crept into their room. She was still awake.

" Harry, dear, how late !" she said. " Has the work gone well ?"

He knew there would be a little difficulty in crisp articulation, but he mastered it.

"So well," he said. "Oh how rippingly tired I am!"

"But I wish you Merry Christmas, darling," she said.

"Yes. Same to you, Nellie. Isn't it jolly?"

He read the night's work to Eleanor next day after lunch, when the rest of the members of the household had dispersed to their various obligations, for Christmas Day was, so to speak, a week of Sundays with regard to religious instruction and observance, and she was in no doubt whatever about the quality of the work. If the Uncontrollable had had a long and wilful holiday, it had clearly come back invigorated and refreshed, and had come back, too, willingly to its work; no lures had been laid for it, no ferrets sent in. Even if Harry had had any intention before of laying the story of last night before his wife, the intensity of her congratulations, the sincerity of her joy in this return of his ability, would have made it almost impossible for him, with the weakness of disposition that was his, to spoil her hour. Besides, so he told himself, there was no need; he had but to complete what was so near completion, and again his will would be entirely bent on healing a habit that, after all, could have as yet no indissoluble hold on him, else he had been unable to hold it at arm's length during this last fortnight.

"Oh, Harry, what a joy good work is!" she said; "and all this is worth its weight in pearls to me, over and above its own excellence. And now, dear, I'm going to confess, and you may scold me, or impose on me any penance you like, for I was frightened last night; I didn't entirely trust you. I was afraid when you said you were going to sit up and work, that . . . that . . . I needn't say it. Instead you bring me this beautiful, cool, clean-cut work! Now, what is the penance?"

It must not be supposed that her confidence did not move him to make his confession also. It would have been acutely mortifying to him, and (a thing that weighed more with him) acutely painful to her to hear it, and yet by far the major part of his mind was made up to tell her; but the final ounce of resolution failed him, and that having failed, he took the only other possible course. As he could not manage to tell the complete truth, he had as completely to deceive her; but it went against the grain, hideously and grindingly. It was only just a little easier than the other.

"Oh, Nellie," he said, and, with art that rivalled his own finest dramatic invention, he paused a moment. "And the penance?" he continued. "Why, that you won't do it again."

She raised her dim eyes to him. The art concealed itself; it rivalled sincerity.

"That's too easy," she said. "But do you forgive me, Harry? That will make it more difficult."

"Why, there's nothing to forgive," he said.

That was perfectly true; but he never told a more atrocious lie. And even while the shame of it suffocated him like smoke, he told himself that after all his lie was venial. Though he had deceived her in actual fact, he was utterly determined that his future conduct should make his lie true. She should never have cause to distrust him again. The affair of last night was an accident . . . and he could not spoil her pride and triumph. Even at the first he had felt himself incapable of that cruelty; now, with his lie to acknowledge as well, the cruelty would be an inhumanity that he could not contemplate. Yet he loved her—such strength as was his, loved her. Only he did not love her with his weakness also. He could not bear her to see it quite naked, although ashamed.

That night again Harry worked late. But the play was finished, and his resolution was taken afresh by him. He had refused wine at dinner, and Eleanor was asleep when he came to bed.

CHAPTER XI

THERE was given in London during the months of February a short season of Ibsen plays, which, for some inscrutable reason, took the town by storm. The theatre-goers, perhaps because there was no new play produced, perhaps because the majority of the old ones were not very good, had found in them something it was looking for, some reflection of their own mood, and perhaps of London weather, which was dismal and sordid and vaguely ominous. In any case, the little Wellington Theatre was crammed every evening, and the stalls (for the demand for seats was mainly of that class) had encroached like a rising tide in the pit, till there was practically no pit left. "Hedda Gabler" had been packed; the "Master Builder" had been packed, both with serious and opulent people, and when "Little Eyolf" was announced, he had, in anticipation, the greatest success of all. And "Little Eyolf" was to appear for the first time on a certain Tuesday evening.

That afternoon Louis Grey, who was studying his part in Harry's new play, after lunch, in his flat in Grafton Street, was urgently demanded by the telephone. He had sent his servant once to say he was out, but the desire to know when he would be in was pressed beyond the limits of his excuse. The message was from the actor-manager of the Wellington Theatre, who was in trouble because the Rat-Wife had influenza, and did he know of anybody who was in the least competent to fill her place at a moment's notice? A year ago, or a little more, he had given a couple of Ibsen plays himself; it was therefore possible that he was in touch with a performer.

"Of course it is a tiny part," so came the staccato squeak of the respected colleague who was responsible for these revivals, "and we can get a super just to go through with it. But do you know of anyone who can act it?"

"Yes; I'll try," he said. "I don't know if it's possible. But there is a woman who can act it."

"Oh, who is she?" asked the mouse at the ear.

"Shan't tell you. But I'll do my best."

"Thanks awf——" began the voice.

He replaced the receiver and turned up an address.

Yes, Mrs. Whittaker was at home.

Then came Eleanor's voice.

"Yes, please come quickly," she said. "Harry and I were just going out. But if it's important, we will wait."

"It is," he said.

Five minutes later he was in Mount Street, and explained his errand. Harry was in his study, and he explained it to Eleanor alone.

"I know you could do it," he said, "and I stake what you please on your doing it, not well, but very well. Have you seen any of the Ibsen plays?"

"Yes, 'Hedda Gabler,'" said she.

"Well, then, you saw how good it was throughout. That is the whole secret of their success. There isn't an inadequate moment. But there will be ten inadequate moments if a super does the Rat-Wife."

He paused a moment.

"I am making the most extraordinary request," he said. "I know you have never been on a real stage with a real audience. But you did it here in the dining-room with Harry to say the rest of the scene and myself to look on."

"Yes, and I forgot half of it," said she.

"More than half if you will. But if you will consent to appear in the Rat-Wife this evening you won't forget any of it. You will have the stimulus of the thing itself, the hard fact that you can't forget any of it."

"But it's impossible," said Eleanor. "I should have to rehearse; I should have to know how to move about the stage."

And then all the secret ambition flared up again. Here was a serious actor telling her not to take account of her fears and utter lack of experience.

"You can come down with me now," he said, "and learn the size of the stage, and see your exit, and know where Eyolf and the rest are sitting. Come and look first, if you will, and decide afterwards. I so well remember Harry telling me that you were acting-mad. Here's a very comfortable asylum. I dare say the woman who is cast for the part will be well to-morrow, and you need not do it again unless you choose. But, though you tell me you don't know

anything about acting and all the rest of it, you would do a great kindness to poor Anderson, if you would consider it, and consider now at once. He can get a super to walk through the part, as I told you, but of course he wants to have it acted. He asked me if I knew anyone who could act it. I said I did. It's up to you, Mrs. Whittaker. That's a phrase from poker, which is a game of chance. I don't think there's any sort of chance about your power to do the Rat-Wife."

This interview presented itself to Eleanor in the light of a dream that had come true. For years she had longed, with the inexpressibility of day-dreams, for something like this. She had indulged them because they were so fantastic. Now, in the clear thin light of a February afternoon, her dreams, woven and real, in return for the impalpable fleeces, were put into her hands. She could not discuss them, for they came from her own loom. But she still sought not to recognize them.

"But Harry wouldn't let me," she said.

"Then, may I ask Harry ?" said he.

"I suppose so. I know he won't. But even if he does—— Oh, Mr. Grey, I should love it ! But it's quite impossible."

"Then, where is Harry ?" he asked.

Louis had but a word with him, and the two came back to her.

"Nellie, there was never anything so lovely !" he cried. "You have always longed to act—act really, act seriously ! What a chance !"

"Oh, Harry, I hoped you would say 'No,'" she said.

"No, you didn't. Did you ?"

Eleanor looked from one encouraging face to the other encouraging face.

"I suppose I didn't," she said. "Oh, you will both be sorry for this. So shall I."

"May I telephone ?" asked Louis.

The whole thing had been so sudden that Eleanor had scarcely time to be alarmed, for there was so much to do before she had leisure for terror. She drove off immediately with both men, and found herself ten minutes afterwards on an empty stage. Louis Grey was Mrs. Allmers, Mr. Anderson was, as he would be this evening, Mr. Allmers, Harry was Little Eyolf. They placed themselves where they would be in the scene, and she made her entry.

Then—it was not that what she had to do was easy, it was simply inevitable. Little Eyolf had a book to prompt her

with, but there was no need for that. Such rehearsal as there was she conducted herself. Twice she stopped herself.

"I must begin that speech sooner," she said, "as I have to get close to Little Eyolf. Yes, just one sentence sooner, before I begin to cross over."

And the second time:

"I must begin to move before I say good-bye."

She said the words to herself. "And as I say 'a kind good-bye,' I must be close to my exit," she added, "I see."

Then she tossed back her hair.

"Can't I do it with my own hair?" she asked. "I should feel so hot in a wig, and I should never know what the wig was going to do. Look, like this!"

She loosened her hair a little, letting it fall over her forehead, making her face small.

"Like that," she said. "That's so much more safe."

Anderson looked at her as if with recognition.

"But it *is* the Rat-Wife," he said.

That certainly was the opinion of a full house in the evening. It was announced on fly-leaves put into programmes that Miss Coventry was indisposed, and that her place as the Rat-Wife was to be taken by Miss Ramsden, a name that roused neither expectation nor the reverse in the minds of any. But for the few minutes that she was on the stage she utterly held the house. From the moment she entered there came with her some dreadful sense of horror and dismay. She spoke in a whining monotone, and, though she looked old and ill and fragile, there seemed to lurk in her some sort of primeval and elfin power. The play that had up to her entrance done no more than interest the audience, suddenly gripped them. She screwed it up, made it tense and terrible.

Louis and Harry were in a box together; the former leaned forward a little as Eleanor came on to the stage, and sat then without word or movement till "a kind good-bye" quavered across the listening house. Then he turned to Harry.

"Born to it," he said.

They went round, as arranged, at the end of the act behind the scenes. There had been a special call for her, and it had been repeated, and she had just come off for the second time, blind with straightforward pleasure.

"Oh, and Miss Coventry has got very bad influenza, Harry," she cried. "Isn't it fun, because Mr. Anderson wants to know if I can take her place all this week? I said I

should have to ask you first, Harry, of course, but you were coming round after the first act. And he is going to pay me a salary. Just fancy! At least, I suppose he meant a salary, because he talked about remuneration, which means the same, doesn't it? How are you, Mr. Grey? Did I make an awful goose of myself? No, I know I didn't do that. But it was such fun that I can't be serious."

She had been allowed to wear her own lovely hair in place of the dreadful wig, and she pushed it back off her hot face. Somehow she had made herself look small and frail on the stage; now, as she stood there, Rat-Wife no longer, she wa of her own height again, straight in the shoulder, with a column of neck rising above that supported that little face, but was justified by the weight of smouldering gold. Louis had looked on her first as a girl with a clear capacity for acting; then he had looked on her, often and often, as a charming woman, Harry's wife, an amiable hostess, a friend even. But now he saw her differently. The various lines had been fused together. Her performance and her personality had joined,and the product stood there, looking at him with level eyes, eager for his commendation, unconscious of him as a man. But he, with his professional appreciation quite ready, was conscious of her as a woman. The rather weird-looking tall girl, who a year ago had engaged his attention as a witch, seemed to have come of age, to have made her place, assumed her birthright. All that had been to him a pleasant contemplation, a sunrise, so to speak, or a flower, stepped out of the inanimate into the rank of the living, significant entities.

"But you will have to take yourself seriously," he said, shaking hands with her. "At least, you will have all the joke to yourself if you don't. But really, Mrs. Whittaker—or are you Miss Ramsden still?—it was an admirable little performance. Do you remember we once all talked together about the different qualities of silence in a theatre: the polite, indifferent silence, the critical silence, the real silence. I assure you that you got the real silence."

"Oh no, did I?" asked Eleanor, not quite ingenuously, for in her heart of hearts she knew she had held her audience. But all her conscious self was chary of recognizing it. It seemed to her frankly impossible that she should have done as well as this, or if not impossible, so delightful that she had to treat it like a dream that had appeared to come true. She must have external evidence on its reality.

"I assure you that you did. Do try to remember what it sounds like," said he. "When we are on the stage we are always listening for it. And when it comes, you know that, for so long as it lasts, you have the theatre in the hollow of your hand. You can play on it, and it can resist no more than the piano can resist the fingers that make it laugh or sob."

"And I got it ?" asked Eleanor, still hardly credulous.

"You did indeed."

Harry was boyishly jubilant at his wife's success; there was no necessity for keeping her identity a secret, and he told a dozen critic-friends during the intervals between the acts, with the natural effect that all the papers next morning had complimentary little notices about Miss Ramsden, and made it appear that nobody else, except each of their individual selves, had the slightest idea who she was. Also, directly after breakfast next morning, before going down to the first rehearsal of his new play, he bought her, at staggering expense, a charming little jade rat, with ruby eyes and gold whiskers. It had been arranged that she should go down to the theatre in the afternoon and call for him, and, since she was young and eager and delighted with her success last night, it followed that she laid out no less than two shillings in procuring all the morning papers that a neighbouring bookstall held, and spent most of the morning in reading what each had to say about herself. Though she felt she would be obliged to tell Harry in how vain and prinking a manner she had employed herself, she could not resist the fascination of this search. It was still hardly credible that printers had set up type, and papers published (so that she became some infinitesimal part of their force) criticism and praise about her acting.

The first she opened at was so laudatory that she still almost wondered whether there was not some conspiracy to fool her, and she cut this out, unable to resist the pleasure of sending it to her father. With it she sent a note.

"Oh, darling daddy, you will never guess ! Miss Coventry, who's an actress, fell ill yesterday, and as hers was a part I had studied, Mr. Grey asked me to take her place in a real true theatre, quite seriously ! And I did, and just look what the *Daily Times* says. I acted as *Miss Ramsden*, and, of course, I asked Harry first. Will you tell mamma that, if she wonders ? I did enjoy it."

Eleanor did not close the envelope. Perhaps there might

be another clipping or two to put in. She tried the *Morning Telegraph* next. There was quite a long notice of "Little Eyolf," and her eye ran quickly down the column searching for mention of the Rat-Wife. She soon found it, and as she read her face unconsciously assumed an expression of ludicrous dismay.

"Miss Coventry, unfortunately, was ill, and could not play the part of the Rat-Wife, and it is charitable, therefore, to suppose that her place was filled at the very last moment. But it would really be better that when no competent understudy is available in such cases, the part should be merely read by a dresser or scene-shifter, book in hand, than that an audience should be asked to witness such excruciating incompetence. We suppose that this is Miss Ramsden's first appearance: her friends should urge her to make it her last."

Eleanor felt as if some stranger in the street had slapped her face, and, indeed, it had turned as red as if that had actually been done.

"Oh, but he is unkind!" she said half-aloud, and for a little sat in gloom and dismay. She had to act again to-night, too, and for the moment she felt that she could not. Had she really been as bad as that? The conspiracy to fool her was not quite so widespread as she could have wished. Then, with a certain grim honesty, she cut that out too, and put it in the letter to her father. It necessitated another line or two.

"But I enclose the *Morning Telegraph* as well," she added, "which seems vexed with me."

Eleanor was not quite so eager to open the next sheet. But as she read, again her colour mounted, and she plied eager scissors.

"Oh, he is kind!" she said to herself, and popped that also into her letter. Then followed a quantity of amiable conspiracy, another slap in the face, and more amiability. But all the critics noticed the Rat-Wife, whether they liked her or not.

Harry, meantime, had been spending the dreariest of mornings, seated in the sheeted stalls of the theatre, while a quantity of discontented and apparently incompetent ladies and gentlemen said their parts in bored voices, and forgot their cues. Miss Anstruther in particular moved him to despair. She also expressed despair, when she and Louis Grey, and the discouraged author had lunch together at a neighbouring restaurant. She was one of those highly

exciting people who are never on a normal level, and observed the world through the extremes of her own personality. Her friends, that is to say, were alternately angels and brutes; circumstances heavenly or hellish. Harry, up till now, and his work, had been celestial, and they had been on terms of excellent good-comradeship. To-day he and it appeared framed in blackness of the pit. But even when she took (and expressed) the most desperate opinions about her friends, she was a privileged person. She could be outrageous, but somehow, when she was kind again, she was so enchanting that no one dreamed of resentment, for her force and her charm had the power of obliterating the past. It seemed to the two men just now that the present would need erasure.

"I don't know what my part means," she was saying. "There's no character in it. It is nothing but sloppy, sugary benevolence. Fancy me being benevolent! Or sugary! Why, the theatre will shriek with laughter. They will think it is the most tremendous joke. Think of those lines in the second act: 'My dear, a man's character is the sum of his intentions and choices. Look your failure in the face and have done with it.' Why, someone in the pit will shout out "Hymn 253, 'O happy band of pilgrims,' with the congregation all joining!" They will indeed! Mr. Harry, it's an impossible part. And you could so easily make it a lovely one! The whole construction of the play is beautiful; but can't it happen to a woman who has got salt in her instead of sugar?"

Her clear, low-pitched voice was very audible, and from two or three tables round the other guests were listening. There was no mistaking Miss Anstruther with her dark beauty, and gesturing hands. She saw the notice she was attracting, and covered her face in her muff, looking above it at the two men with her great black eyes.

"Oh, how shocking!" she said. "It will all be in the evening papers that Mr. Grey and Mr. Harry and I were all lunching together, and quarrelling, and singing hymns! Shall I try talking not quite so loud?"

"Yes. I really wish you would," said Harry, in a voice that might have been called snappish.

Instantly she set to work to smooth him down. It was in her nature to behave to every man she met as if he alone mattered, whether for the time he was celestial or the reverse. Also, it was worth while trying to get her way by wheedling before she became odious.

"Oh, I am such a brute!" she said, "laughing at your nice play. But, dear Mr. Harry, if you don't want them to sing hymns in the pit, do alter my part just a little. If you cut out a dozen or two sentences, and put in something that's strong instead, it would make such a difference. And I could act it then! Drink some wine. We're all cross and exhausted, and hungry, and thirsty. Let's eat and drink for five minutes, and then go on again. Caviare! My poor sister has got a new wig exactly like caviare, little round black curls, millions of them, teeny-weeny!"

She poured out a glass of hock for Harry, and clinked her glass at his.

"No—no wine, thanks," he said.

"But you must when a lady so far forgets herself as to ask you to drink with her. Come, Mr. Harry. Success to the play! And may it run till the sea gives up its dead, and the Conservatives get in again. Just give me a little salt though, no not that, but in the play. I cannot be an earnest soulful Mothers' Meeting."

Harry had brought down with him this morning the old copy of the play into which he had written the new interpolated lines which gave to Stella the kindliness and geniality to which Miss Anstruther so much objected. It lay on the table beside her, and as she spoke, she took it up, and began turning over the leaves.

"There are so many little things you could so easily alter," she said. "It's so easy to make Stella a little human and hasty. You really seem as if you had been in two minds about her yourself, Mr. Harry, for here you write first of all, 'You'll come in last, my dear, and we know who looks after the hindmost.' Oh, why did you cross it out? That is such a nice way of saying you are going to the devil; I could say that! Instead, what is it? Something about lagging and loitering! Oh—and here again, and here again! You have crossed out exactly the things I want to say, and which no one can phrase like you. Mr. Harry, what was the matter with you, that you altered it all like this? Was it Christmas Eve, or indigestion, or country parsonage? You told me you were parsonizing for the holidays. All through—all through you have been taking the spice out, and putting suet in instead."

Harry looked across at Louis.

"I told you so," he said.

Miss Anstruther transferred her attention, and for the moment her powers of sweet feminism to him.

"Do you mean that you got Mr. Harry to alter it?" she asked.

"Yes; I advised him to. The part would not have won a particle of sympathy. Nobody would have cared for Stella. I don't say the play in the abstract is improved by the remodelling of the character, but from the point of view of the theatre it is."

"Oh, trust me!" she said. "I will promise to get the sympathy. They will adore me."

"You, perhaps," said he, "but not the part in the play. I assure you, also, that you would have insisted on the part being made more sympathetic. You would have said you must have some tenderness and womanliness in it."

She laughed.

"Oh, don't tell me how fractious and disagreeable I am," she said, "because I am perfectly well aware of that depressing fact, and you are too angelic not to lose your temper with me. But I only ask you to let me have the part as it was. And it isn't like you, you know, to spoil the play in order to secure the washy sympathy of the feeble-minded."

"But I don't agree with you," said he. "I don't think it spoils the play, and incidentally it makes it a play which I hope the British public will like. There is nothing undramatic in having a sympathetic heroine, and the B. P. happens to prefer one."

She made a little gesture of impatience, with a clicked thumb and finger.

"And I am the lamb decked out to be sacrificed to the British public," she said. "Baa—baa! I must study sweet and sympathetic women, I suppose, and try to find out the secret of their charm."

"The secret of their charm," observed Harry, "is their sweetness and their sympathy."

"And to judge by my part," said she, "their dulness and their platitudes."

Louis Grey had had experience of Miss Anstruther before. There was no one who worked harder or took greater pains with a part when she happened to like it, but no one who could make herself more odious if she was not carefully handled. So he broke in quickly, fearing that Harry might make some natural but irritating answer.

"But we all know how deadly a first rehearsal is," he said,

"how we all feel that we can never make anything out of our unfortunate author's work. Do be patient a little; forget your dislike of the part and start fresh. Stella is a good woman, it is true, but I think Harry has made an excellent reply to the idea that goodness and dulness are synonymous."

"I find his reply is in the affirmative," she said.

Harry retained the serenity of his temper and laughed.

"Yet I assure you that it is not," he said. "All the time I was writing the revised part I was thinking of quite the least dull woman I know, except yourself, of course."

She made a little gesture with her long hands.

"But it was just me you should have been thinking about. Me, me, me!" she cried. "I can't act, you see, I can only go on the stage and behave there exactly as I behave when I'm off it, and say the things I say off it! And I do not resemble in the smallest degree the part you have written for me. Oh, Mr. Harry, do behave nicely, and think about me a little, and not about the dullest—or was it the least dull—woman, you know? Who is she, I wonder? Do tell me!"

Harry did not particularly care to bring Eleanor into the discussion, and he passed over the last question.

"But I want to behave nicely," he said. "Will you let me go through the part with you? Will you come and dine with us this evening?"

To this she gave a ready assent, since it gave her an opportunity to tackle one of the opposing forces alone. Louis Grey rose.

"Well, we must get back to the theatre," he said. "Are you coming, Harry?"

"Only for a few minutes. Eleanor is going to call for me there after lunch."

Miss Anstruther had some small errand to perform first, and the two men strolled back together.

"But for Heaven's sake don't go tinkering the part," said Louis, "and allow her to say one sharp thing, on condition she says another sympathetic thing. You'll get in no end of a mess if you attempt that."

"Oh, trust me!" said Harry lightly.

Louis laughed.

"I trust no man," he said, "when Marian Anstruther wants to persuade him to do something for her. She has a perfectly astounding faculty of persuading men to make fools of themselves for her. I very nearly did myself."

"How ?"

"By asking her to marry me. Can you imagine a less happy assortment ?"

"Not very easily. But she does want someone to look after her."

Louis considered his reply for a moment, before making it.

"Yes, but not you or me," he said.

Harry had no reply to this, and the other did not press the significance of his words. He only meant to convey the most distant of hints, and that in such a way that if it had absolutely no significance for Harry, it should not seem to contain any.

"Did you know her late husband ?" he asked at length.

"Hardly. She was only married a few months. It was scarcely an incident to be remembered, and I think she has forgotten it."

"Do you mean she is heartless ?" asked Harry.

"I don't think she is aware, anyhow, of the existence of that inconvenient organ."

"Inconvenient ?"

"Yes, because when it aches you can't have it out."

Harry had forgotten that Eleanor was again acting the Rat-Wife, and would not be at home, when he asked Miss Anstruther to dinner, but since their purpose was to study the part which she found so alien to her abilities, his guest was perfectly ready to put up with a *tête-à-tête*. Indeed, as a matter of fact, the *tête-à-tête* was very much to her mind, for husband, wife, and extraneous lady, not the friend of the wife, seemed to her not a very happy sort of gathering, and she much preferred to have Harry alone. Professional reasons were really quite enough to account for her preference, though, had there been no play to study, she would still have looked forward to a very pleasant evening in his undivided company. Eleanor she had met once or twice only at the theatre, but she had never been asked to the flat, and, though there was no question of being hurt at the omission, it had occurred to her that Eleanor did not much like her. Also, though vaguely and tentatively, she was on the way to be jealous of Eleanor for her annexation of her husband, since she had often thought Harry, with his weakness and his charm, and his undoubted brain, to be exactly the sort of man whom she would have liked to marry. She would have felt certain of using his weakness to get her own way whenever she

wanted it, and there remained over his charm, which she would have enjoyed, and his brains, which were clever enough to provide out of the end of a pen this delightfully appointed flat.

Eleanor had gone to the theatre when she arrived. She came into the room where Harry was waiting, with a sort of eager pleasure in her manner that was distinctly flattering to her host. She had been admirably docile too, at the adjourned rehearsal. It was clear she desired to be agreeable.

"But such a delicious nest as yours I have never seen!" she said. "We poor actors and actresses slave our lives out, and stand in draughts and windy corridors, and never have such a thing as civilized dinner except on Sundays, or when we are out of work and can't afford it; while you authors, after a month's leisurely scribbling in an easy-chair from ten to twelve, take a flat in Mount Street and buy a motor-car. Dear Mr. Harry, don't think I envy you your good fortune: I rejoice at it. And I am not late, am I? I tried so hard to be punctual."

She had come into the room with her cloak still over her shoulders, and cannot be quite acquitted of intention in this regard. For the cloak was delicious in itself, silk of rose-madder tint, and the collar of it and its outline were trimmed with feathers of the same shade, soft as the wisps of cloud that float in the western sky at the setting of the sun. Harry, like most proper men, knew nothing whatever about clothes, but, like most proper men, he knew that her olive-skinned face and black hair combined with the cloak to make a charming picture.

"Certainly you have succeeded in being punctual," he said, shaking hands. "Your cloak?"

"Ah, you have noticed it?" she asked. "I kept it on partly because it was bitter outside, and partly for you to see it. Stella: second act? Do you think so? But don't let us talk shop yet. I am hungry and exhausted, and I should be cross, except that I know you are going to make me amiable. But what a day! Bitter wind outside, first rehearsal inside, and—and is it too much to call Mr. Grey a bitter wind inside? What a cad I am to suggest he is like an east wind! But he shrivelled me to-day; that is why I was so stupid."

She peeled off her cloak as she spoke, and again, though Harry did not know about clothes, it was clear that she was admirably clad. To the masculine mind she seemed almost magnificently dressed; the feminine mind would have had no doubt whatever about it. Her beautiful arms were bare; so

too, were her shoulders; some glittering arrangement of sequins of the same colour as her cloak separated the one from the other. From the edge of the low-necked dress fell cascades of them, in loose lines and loops; the bodice and skirt were embroidered with them likewise, in sprays of leaf and flower. To him the effect was undetailed; there was the beautiful head, the bare arms, the slim bare bosom, the glory of the gown. When he and Eleanor dined alone he remembered that she usually wore what she called a tea-gown. Probably it was very pretty, but he never noticed Eleanor's gown, simply because the wearer was Eleanor. But it would have been mere idiocy not to have noticed Miss Anstruther's gown. You might as well have pretended not to notice a flash of lightning.

He laid the cloak down on a chair.

"And is this Stella's evening dress in the second act?" he asked.

"Ah, that depends on you, Mr. Harry," she said. "I must know first what sort of Stella you are going to let me have before I choose her gown. But this is shop again, and I do want to forget for a little that I am a shop-woman. Dinner ready, did she say? Take me in. I am so hungry."

She took his arm, letting the weight of her hand fall on it, and they went into the dining-room.

"Delightful!" she said. "Dark above, so that we can talk; light on the table, so that we can see our food. I am sure it was you who arranged the lighting. Women never seem to remember that a dining-room is a place to eat in, and they arrange the lights in such a way as most becomes their silly faces. As if anybody wanted to look at them when he ate. Everyone is hideous when she eats, chumping her jaw up and down, like a cow in a meadow. It is so important to see one's food, too; whether that looks pretty matters so much more when one is having dinner than what one looks like oneself. But then most women don't consider their food at all—most nice women, I mean. They say they don't care what they eat. So I can't be nice; but as I never thought I was, it is no great blow to me. Delicious soup! So hot and so strong! I can see hundreds of chickens floating about in it. Some day for your sins, you and your wife must dine with me, and eat the warm thick paste which is vaguely known as white soup in my establishment. Oh! and toast with currants in it. I am greedy."

There was a simplicity about this which somehow charmed

him and throughout dinner their conversation ran on similar undisturbing but primitively interesting topics. The weather came in for abuse, the roast partridge for praise and repetition, a celebrated murder trial that was going on for highly speculative guesses as to the manner of the crime. Then Eleanor's autocrat, a young Persian kitten, entered with the roast partridge, and made one wild leap of it into Miss Anstruther's dress, and announced its approval and desires by tea-kettle purrings, and a silvery-blue paw stretched out towards her plate. The gown was not really designed for kittens, but she gave it the same radiancy of greeting that she had given to everything else.

"And the puss-cat has come just in time for the most delicious thing that she ever ate," said she, "with her red ribbon on to show she is a Socialist, and that therefore everything that I thought was mine belongs to her. Partridge, toast with currants in it, champagne? No, we think partridge."

"Oh, don't let her be a nuisance," said Harry. "Eleanor spoils her. Morris, I think you had better take the little cat away."

Miss Anstruther spread a protecting hand over her.

"Oh no, I want her here," she said. "It is such a compliment when a little young thing takes you for granted, and sits down on you. Mayn't she stop? I have an affinity with cats. They recognize me as one of themselves. Everything belongs to us, and if we want a thing we go on till we get it. Of course you can kill us, but short of that there is no stopping us."

"But that's not confined to cats," said Harry. "If any of us want a thing enough, we get it."

She laughed.

"But most of us don't want enough," she said. "The quality of your desire is not sufficiently strong. But puss-cats and I know what wanting means."

Harry had drunk champagne, though in no way excessively, throughout dinner. It was natural; it was, indeed, almost dictated by mere politeness that he should take one glass, "to keep Miss Anstruther company" in vulgar but expressive parlance. His intention had been to do no more than infinitesimally sip it, quenching his thirst with water, and it was, indeed, an oversight on his part that he had drunk it quickly and had his glass refilled. After all, for once in what, indeed, was a very long way (since up to lunch-time that day he had not touched wine for six weeks), it was a thing of no moment

whether he took wine or not, since it was only the habit of excess which was his enemy, and presently he began to feel that exquisite unthawing and content of his brain which he had not known for so long. All his feelings and emotions were at the same time soothed and sharpened: a certain internal sunlight both braced and warmed him, his faculties seemed like bright drawn swords, instead of pieces of sheathed pointlessness. He was expanded; he wished well to all things —wished, too, with a sudden sense of missing something that Eleanor was here, yet—and the limitation followed quickly as a flicked whip-lash on the wish—had she been here he could never have attained this sunlit plateau. Meantime, however, for consolation till Eleanor's return, there was this comrade-like and admirably beautiful woman to be his bodily and mental neighbour: she was enchanting, her kindness to the little cat a revelation of tenderness, her keen pleasure in her dinner and the common topics a delicious piece of pure frank childlikeness.

She gave a little sigh as she spoke, and caressed the ears of the purring cat, and Harry felt that she was probing into things more intimate than she had touched yet. For the moment the brilliance of her beauty was overlaid with something moonlit.

"What do you want so much?" he said. "You are beautiful, you are young, you are successful. What else is there to want?"

She looked at him quite straight.

"I want friends," she said. "Oh, so badly!"

"I should have thought you numbered them by the score," said he.

She was resting her elbow on the table as they sat waiting for coffee at the end of dinner, with her chin resting on the knuckles of her hands. At this, with an admirable gesture, she lifted her head and showed him her empty hands.

"Not one," she said. "I don't go the right way about it, I suppose. I can make myself attractive, I know quite well; and then, when all is going swimmingly, and I feel I am making a beginning, I do something or say something so odious that I might as well never have made a beginning at all. To-day at lunch, for instance, did a woman ever make herself more disagreeable to two dear nice kind men? The only thing that can be said for me is that I generally am sorry afterwards. But the possible friends are scattered to the winds of heaven like sparrows when the cat comes into the garden. And the

cat is left whisking her tail, and wondering why everything flies away. Poor dear! They fly away from a very proper instinct of self-preservation."

Harry felt all his chivalry and warm-heartedness go out to her.

"You do yourself a great injustice," he said, "in comparing yourself to a cat. But you also do an injustice to other people in comparing them to sparrows. For instance, you say you behaved odiously at lunch, and dispersed in all directions those who might be friends. Well—you were rather short with us, but how about the dispersal? This old bird didn't fly away, because he knew perfectly well there was no cat. So they dined together, didn't they?"

He looked wonderfully attractive; his little speech, too, was charming, and she had no doubt of its sincerity. She also had been sincere in her lament for her touchiness; that is to say, she felt, for the moment at any rate, that what she said was true. But, even while she felt it to be true, she felt also the dramatic picturesqueness of the little scene. And she felt with fully equal sincerity a slightly more formulated jealousy of this delightful young man's wife. There was no drama about that; it was quite straightforward. She broke out into a laugh; it seemed to her that enough had been said for the moment.

"Yes, they dined together," she said, "and the cat purred—she purred like this lump lying here—because she had such a pleasant dinner. And she really is grateful to the—the old bird, wasn't it?—who didn't fly away. Now, Mr. Harry, am I to leave you, and are you going to join me when you are tired of your own society?"

"No, certainly not. Let's sit and drink our coffee here, and then, you know, the business of the evening begins."

She sighed.

"Yes; what a pity, isn't it? In another half-hour I suppose the poor cat will be spitting and howling in the garden and the sparrow squawking and scolding in a tree. It's the way of the world, isn't it—at any rate, the way of the world that has got to push and fight for their places. We wriggle and bite and sting each other in the dust. Oh, dear me!"

"And what is it now?" asked he.

"Nothing, my dear man. But just remember, if I am more than usually unpleasant, that—that I am a bundle of moods and nerves, and never mean a single thing I say, unless I expressly tell you so."

They went to the drawing-room, and as there was a couple of hours' work before them, Harry at once produced the play. But the fire had been allowed to die down, since after dinner, when there was no one dining with them, they usually sat in his study, and the room was rather chilly. He had not noticed it, but as they settled themselves Miss Anstruther picked up her cloak again.

"Cold?" he said. "By Jove, yes, the fire's nearly out. I wonder if we should not be more comfortable in my study. Do you mind a very untidy room? Eleanor and I always sit there after dinner."

"Ah, that sounds delightful," she said. "Let us go. I like rooms to be untidy and used-looking. This might be anybody's room, though it is charmingly pretty."

She established herself in an arm-chair, he on the sofa in front of the fire; but before long, wanting to refer back to an earlier page, she seated herself by him, in order to find the speech in question, and did not move back again. She interrupted his reading and explanations very seldom, but he became more and more conscious of her propinquity, of the white arm that lay close to his black sleeve, touching it occasionally when she leaned over to follow his reading. Without moving his head, he could see, with eyes that looked ever so little sideways, the lines of a skirt; with scarcely greater inclination of his eyes, the rise and fall of her bosom. Yet what he read had all been written with Eleanor in his mind; she had been there so vividly that her voice rang in his head. The spirit of it, too, was all Eleanor's; the thought, the attitude, was hers as truly as the expression. It was bewildering to read it all to another woman sitting close at his side.

The act came to an end, and she sat silent a moment.

"Yes, I was hasty, I was impatient," she said. "I see that now. The character is beautiful; I understand that. But can I do more than understand it? It is not enough to understand merely when one acts. One has to digest, assimilate. But do tell me who you were thinking of all the time you wrote. Or is it a secret?"

He had not wished to tell her this morning; now her softness and friendliness made it easy. Perhaps, even if she had not asked, he would have told her.

"There is no secret," he said. "Surely a man may think of his wife."

She paused again, then got up.

"Ah, you are very happy, then," she said. "That makes me see, too, why you would find it difficult to alter it. If the head and the heart write together, it must be scarcely possible to do differently. But that makes it even harder for me to hope to satisfy you in the part. I need not tell you I will do my very best. But it is hard; you must allow it is hard."

Somehow they seemed to each other to have taken a great leap forward in intimacy. She felt him to be a friend; she, to him, had come nearer also.

"And you don't think Stella dull and sugary?" he asked. "At least you think her less so?"

"I no longer think her dull and sugary. It was my mistake. Will you go straight on, Mr. Harry? And may I have a cigarette, or is that out of tone with the part?"

Perhaps the claws were unsheathed for a moment then, though they did not scratch him. He laughed.

"Oh no; Eleanor smokes," he said.

"I will, then, too. And where does she sit when you read to her?"

"Where you sat."

He paused a moment.

"Come and sit here again," he said.

The second act was but half through when Eleanor herself came in. They both got up to welcome her.

"And it went well?" asked he.

"Yes, darling, it really did. I am so glad to see you, Miss Anstruther. I have been doing Rat-Wife, you know. But why should you know? Oh, dear, what a glorious gown! I am an awful dowdy always when I dine alone with Harry. Harry, may I have my sandwiches brought in here, and listen while I eat them? Or do I interrupt? I should hate to do that."

That Eleanor's sudden entry was an interruption it was impossible to deny, and the interruption was not confined to the mere fact that she caused a break in the middle of an act. Indeed, that was the least serious part of it, for she had caused a psychical interruption, which, though it did not appear at once on the surface of things, was of the nature of a magnetic storm that deflects compasses. Up till now Marian Anstruther had been listening with sympathy to the reading, had been doing her best to understand the character, to mould her mind into it. But on Eleanor's appearance (she who had inspired these speeches, she who was Harry's wife), her sym-

pathy suddenly veered into antagonism; she became critical instead of comprehending. She had to make herself like Eleanor, who, all unwitting, had turned her out of her place by Harry, and now sat with her arm in his. And the reader was conscious of her changed attitude; he could not help feeling it. All his expansiveness had gone; it was like reading to a post or some other symmetrical inanimate object, some gaily-decked Venetian mast, it might be.

Harry read to the end, and got up.

"I read that very badly," he said.

"Yes, darling, you did," said Eleanor.

Marian Anstruther felt a sudden desire to express herself, and she had to check it. She could have accurately expressed herself by throwing an inkstand at Eleanor, or kissing Harry. He had given her a charming evening; Eleanor had spoiled it. But the former action would have been impolite, the latter liable to misconstruction; so she bottled them both up. From that moment they began to mix with each other. Aloud she said:

"Oh, but I think that quite charming, Mr. Harry! It is rather a long act, is it not?"

Harry felt the disturbance of magnetic current very acutely. Somehow it had been caused by Eleanor's entrance, which was, indeed, a deflection of the compass from its normal star.

"So glad you like it," he said shortly; "but the act is not long: it is rather short, indeed. By Jove! how thirsty reading makes one!"

Quite unthinkingly, without real desire for alcohol, he had taken up the whisky-decanter. The probability is that he would have put it down again untouched, when he saw Eleanor looking at him with question and appeal in her eyes. Somehow that exasperated him; if he put the decanter down, now that he had taken it in his hand, it was easily possible that Miss Anstruther might, seeing Eleanor's look, make some interpretation of what had happened. Then an evasion occurred to him.

"Anything to drink, Miss Anstruther?" he said, uncorking the decanter.

"Yes, just a drop of—what is that?—whisky? Oh, that's far too much, Mr. Harry. Pour half into your own glass."

"Give me that, Harry!" said Eleanor. "I am so thirsty too."

It was unwise of her, though cleverly done. But the

cleverness did not divert him; it but confirmed him. Alone with her, he would have said, "If I mayn't, darling, you shan't either." Now he drowned the teaspoonful of whisky in the two glasses, with a half-tumbler of soda-water, and filled a third glass in not quite the same proportion for himself.

Eleanor had been called before the curtain three times at the conclusion of the first act of the play to-night, and had come home in a glow of rosy pleasure, through which the disturbance her arrival caused had not been able to pierce. But by this time the glow had sufficiently faded to become transparent. Something had certainly occurred to irritate Harry; he had asked but the one question about how she had fared this evening, and he sat now, in preparation for the reading of the third act, with a full glass by his side, poor fellow! Perhaps Miss Anstruther had got on his nerves—that was easily possible; perhaps (and she marvelled at her own obtuseness) it was she herself who had interrupted their reading, and disarranged the mental balance. She had nothing but candid regret if that was the case, and, on the chance of it, it was clearly her part to go away instantly.

She drank half her glass, repressing a shudder—for she loathed the taste of spirits—and got up.

"Miss Anstruther, I know you will excuse me," she said, "if I go to bed. Isn't it stupid of me? I get so much excited over a little part like the Rat-Wife, and that tires one afterwards. Good-night; do come and see us again very soon. Good-night, Harry dear. Try to read the third act better."

She left the room at once, with no more than a smile at the door, and for the moment Miss Anstruther, thinking in a manner which was familiar to her, and which, though usual, was also rather terrible, said to herself, "What a fool!" Comment on the thought is scarcely necessary, but she had divined the reason of Eleanor's withdrawal well enough to know that she left them because she had brought in some element of interruption. This was not Marian's view of the usual conduct of wives, that they should leave their husbands in company with—well with attractive young women like herself. But next moment, though still thinking commonly and rather terribly, she said to herself, "What a clever woman!" For if her husband felt the slightest interest, otherwise than friendly or professional, in his companion there could be no action on the part of his wife, if he was at all fond of her, more likely to render that interest other than abortive. But both her unspoken comments, as a matter of

fact, were completely wide of the mark. Eleanor, to whom this manner of thought was hitherto unknown, had left them for a much simpler reason. She felt she had interrupted, and had gone to bed, sooner than sit there, still faintly disturbing, because she was tired. She had told the exact truth.

But for some reason, neither to Miss Anstruther nor to Harry, did the excellent good-comradeship of the evening return. In some secret fashion, Eleanor's natural and unreflective retirement had suggested to each the reason why she might have remained, and that put a bar, intangible, but nevertheless barrier-like, in the way of their frank friendliness. Before tonight Miss Anstruther had been conscious of vague jealousy of Eleanor ; now it was a little less vague, and a little more hostile. Harry, on his part, slightly excited with unusual wine, resented what he already considered Eleanor's tactlessness over a mild whisky-and-soda, and no longer missed her. He felt that if Marian knew what Eleanor knew, she would be lighter, less ponderous about it. And her beauty and her charm a little dazzled him. When she had gone, he meant to talk to Eleanor seriously about what she had done : he would also inquire about her acting this evening, and quite certainly congratulate her. He remembered that he had omitted to do that.

He moved a little aside on the sofa ; it was clear that his action was to make room for Miss Anstruther. He and Eleanor had sat linked together in the middle of it : that would not do now.

" Are we to read the third act ?" he asked.

She had noticed his action, and the lit flame of jealousy burned a little brighter.

" Ah, but that is your wife's place," she said.

His natural and proper admiration of her, his mere liking to have this beautiful creature near him, flamed a little likewise. Also, he had to excuse it.

" What nonsense !" he said. " It is easier to read to anyone sitting near."

She laughed.

" Oh, if that is all, Mr. Harry," she said, " you must raise your voice a little. I have a cat and a dog in my flat ; they each have their own baskets. Mayn't my basket be here, where I sat when your wife came in ?"

" You shall have your basket where you please," said he.

She gave a little sigh and got up. Her apparent reluctance to sit by him gave him a sense of security. It meant nothing if she sat in one place, or if she sat in another.

"Will that satisfy you?" she asked, taking the place he had indicated. "Now, will you read the third act, or shall we talk about the other two? I think I see what you want with regard to the character; I do not know that you need read the third. I remember it well: it is the same woman who appears there. She has not got—well, witty or sharp, or—or woman of the world. If I can do the first two acts, I can do the third. Besides, you must be tired with reading."

He put the manuscript down. What she said was excellent in common sense.

"You mean there is no need to drink a whole cask of wine," he said, "in order to judge of the vintage. You must have had enough too."

"Would it be rude to say that I have?" she asked. "I suppose I had better be rude, then."

"Rude?" he asked. "To be rude implies that the person you are rude to is affronted. There is no rudeness unless it impresses its quality on somebody else."

"You mean you are not affronted. I am glad."

She paused a moment, liking to look at him, and to be near him.

"Can one be glad alone?" she asked. "I hope not. Because I should like to go shares with you, then. It means that you understood my attitude. You see, I don't really want to hear any more, because I know the rest. There is nothing more for me to learn by your reading it. It would be pleasanter to talk."

He picked up his glass, which was on the floor by him, as she spoke, and finished it.

"Give me another cigarette," she said, "and get yourself some more drink. Talk always goes best when the talkers have all they want. I want a cigarette; you want a drink."

His mind, already on guard over this subject, challenged the word.

"Clever of you to guess," he said, getting up.

"Not a bit. Can't you always tell the thirsty eye, whether it thirsts for drink, or cigarette, or sympathy, or gossip? Thanks."

She waited till he had filled his glass again, and again took his seat by her.

"That is comfortable," she said, leaning her elbow on the back of the sofa towards him. "Now, Mr. Harry, if I can act the part I will. I will do my very best. I see what you mean. But if I am terribly stupid with it—if, though I see

what you mean, I can't give you what you mean, will you be very angry with me ? I want to act it, but if I can't—I hope you won't be very cross. I told you I was friendless ; I don't want to lose the chance of a friend."

"You mean me ?" he asked.

"I do. Is that very terrible of me ? I don't think so. But I am going to do my best with it."

He turned sideways towards her, so that her hand, extending along the back of the sofa, reached past his neck.

"It is altogether charming of you," he said.

She shook her head, softly smiling.

"It is altogether selfish of me," she said. "I want to do the part well, for my own sake ; I want to be a little less lonely, for my own sake also. I am like that : I only think of myself."

She drew back from him, and got on to her feet.

"I must go now," she said, "or your wife will be wondering what I stopped so long for."

"We talked over the third act," said he. "Besides, she doesn't wonder."

The moment he had said it he saw the implication, and corrected it, which was deplorable.

"What is there to wonder about ?" he asked.

But he had asked it. It had occurred to him, though, if he had been obliged to answer his own question, he would honestly have said, "Nothing."

She echoed that.

"But, of course, nothing," she said. "Indeed, I must go. My cloak ? Thanks. I have had such a nice evening. Good-night ! We rehearse at ten to-morrow morning, I believe. What an awful thought !"

He followed her into the hall.

"Please, please, don't come down," she said. "There is nothing so tedious as a returning lift. I do mean it. I shall be vexed if you come down. I leave the sparrow on the house-top. Good-night, dear sparrow."

CHAPTER XII

HARRY closed the door after seeing her into the lift, and went to his dressing-room. From there he went straight to the door into Eleanor's bedroom, tapped, and was admitted.

Eleanor was already in bed, but she was reading by the light that stood close to her. She laid down the book as he entered, and smiled at him.

"Well, dear?" she said. "Has Miss Anstruther just gone? What does she think of the third act?"

He had come in, firmly determined to say what he thought about his wife's conduct over a mere glass of whisky-and-soda. At the time he had resented it; since then his resentment had magnified itself. But at the sight of her lying there, sweet and white and beloved, all in him that resented was melted. He sat down on the edge of her bed, and with her knees she made an arm-rest for him. She, too, had something to say, but the sight of him, so far from melting it, made her purpose the stronger. He was so dear, and so weak.

"Nellie, I meant to scold you," he said, "but I can't. Only you shouldn't have looked at me like that. Miss Anstruther might have guessed. Never mind that for the moment. How did the play go? Were you pleased with yourself?"

His words were a little blurred; probably no one else but she would have noticed it.

"Yes, darling," she said. "It was all right. But never mind that for the moment. Of course Miss Anstruther could have seen nothing. It was only you who knew, that saw. I can't help it, Harry. I hate seeing you drink anything of the sort. Of course, you think once does not matter, nor twice, nor three times. So why not a thousand times, and ten thousand times? There is no end to it, the moment you allow yourself a beginning. At least the only end is the end you know."

He sat upright, taking an attitude of decision. But never till that moment had she seen how weak was his mouth.

"You don't trust me, Nellie," he said. "You don't treat me like an ordinary man, who drinks his wine at dinner and is none the worse for it. It would have been absurd of me not to have a glass of champagne this evening, with Miss Anstruther here. She would have noticed it."

"And what then?" asked Eleanor. "She would have noticed you didn't drink wine. Isn't that better than if the whole world noticed you drank too much? As for not treating you like the ordinary man, that is quite true. You know what the craving for it is, you poor darling. The ordinary man doesn't. It is safe for him, and dangerous for you."

"But I've conquered it," he said. "I haven't touched whisky since we were down at Bracebridge at Christmas, when I finished the play."

Eleanor sat upright in bed.

"Since when?" she asked.

When he said that, he did not remember that he had deceived her then, letting her think he had done that excellent work without other aid than the glass or two of Burgundy on the night of Christmas Eve. Now he remembered it all—her confession that she had mistrusted him, his acceptance of it.

"No, not then, not then," he said. "It was up here, was it not, before we went to Bracebridge, that one night . . ."

But he could not go on. In part his inherent weakness would not support him through it; in part his love for her forbade the infamy of his attempt to endorse the deception.

"I lied to you," he said at length. "It comes to that."

Eleanor recollected with terrible distinctness the manner of it—her joy that at last, after barren weeks, Harry had been able to produce work again without stimulants; her own confession to him; his large-hearted waving of it aside. None of that existed any more.

She passed her hand over her eyes, feeling stunned and shaken.

"Oh, my dear," she said. "What misery!"

Again it was partly his love for her, partly his weakness, that made his surrender complete.

"I am in your hands," he said. "I don't know if you can forgive me."

She rose to that, all woman, all tenderness, not blaming the worst of him, but appealing to the best.

"You must try to forgive yourself, dear Harry," she said. "That is the harder thing. As if I could help forgiving you!"

She knew he wanted that, and gave it willingly. But he needed something stiffer also.

"Of course I am horribly disappointed," she said, "because I have been thinking that you had, on that occasion anyhow, shown that you could do beautiful work soberly and normally. But that can't be helped: all you can do is to show it as soon as possible. As to the other, Harry, you must, as I said, try to forgive yourself. And as for to-night, you know quite well that the best of you agrees with me, when I say you have been an ass. You know quite well it's dangerous for you."

He lifted rather heavy-lidded eyes to her, and nodded without speech.

"Now, dear, it is late," she said. "I want to go to sleep at once, because I am tired. Get to bed quickly.

"I do love you, Nellie," he said.

"It is because I love you that I care so," she answered.

Eleanor played the Rat-Wife twice again after this night to crowded houses. Her identity had of course become known, and she became aware, to her immense amazement, that so small an achievement as hers raised her in the view of the pleasant world that never achieves anything at all on to a pinnacle. She was asked to dine with people she had never heard of, who up till now had never heard of her; and kind Mrs. Wilkins sent her a most appreciative letter, asking her on which out of six future dates she would come to dine with her, and be equally welcome on all. Agents, with addresses in Bond Street, no less, inquired of her, apparently without humorous intention, whether she would accept engagements to recite at private parties, assuring her, with humorous effect, that she would be treated with the same consideration that was extended to other guests, though very likely many of the guests would not in the least have objected to be rewarded with a small cheque afterwards. Most astounding of all, a music-hall proprietor made her a definite offer for her appearance on the boards in the Rat-Wife scene, which, subject to her consent, he proposed to put on his stage, without before or after, between a Japanese juggler and a humorous Scotchman.

This offer she found waiting for her type-written, signed, and all in order, when she came down to a very late breakfast next morning, to find that Harry had already gone off to the early rehearsal. Miss Coventry had sufficiently recovered from her indisposition to take the part for which Eleanor had been substituted, and a letter from Mr. Anderson, informing her of this, seemed to express genuine regret at Miss

Coventry's happy restoration to health. There was a cheque in this, too; everyone seemed suddenly willing to give her money. . . .

But, in spite of these gratifying offers and pledges, Eleanor did not wear her usual morning face. Harry had disappointed her terribly, and he had done more than disappoint her, for she had assumed that his trust and openness with her was completely equivalent to hers in him. She wondered if, by fault of her own, she had failed to secure it, whether it would have been better down at Bracebridge to have said to him, "Get your play finished at any cost, and then take yourself in hand." Certainly, as things had turned out, that would have been better than that he should finish it as he had finished it, but have concealed from her the conditions under which it was done. And not even last night had he meant to tell her: she could not console herself with that. He had told her by accident, not remembering. It was not a little thing over which she made herself miserable, which sucked the honey out of the cheque and the humorous agents, and the hospitable Mrs. Wilkins. The manifestation of it might be little in itself, but what it manifested was, so it seemed to her, the largest thing the world contained for her.

Then the future even more than the past concerned her. Perhaps in the past she had somehow been stupid with him; she had to be wise now. But "where could wisdom be found?" She could not see herself guarding against any future lapse on Harry's part by watching him, surrounding him with the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion. And if she did not use that as a safeguard, it was clear to her that she must go to the very opposite extreme, and protect him from his weaker self by the knowledge that she trusted him without reserve and implicitly. One weapon of the two she must use, and it seemed to her that if cleverness was ready to be employed as the first, wisdom offered itself for the second. She would have to take risks which a peering prudence would cry out against, but the short-sighted view was just that which wisdom cried out against. She must give him all and every facility for deceiving her again, in order to show him that she knew he would not. He must start with a clean sheet: her love, which made it so easy for her to forgive him, must do a more difficult thing than that, and forget also. What had happened must be put out of her mind as often as it crept back there. Otherwise she would be obliged to watch him, and keep him consciously under supervision. It would almost be a challenge to him to slip unobserved from under it, and

the thought of this dreadful game of watched and watcher sickened her. Harry had to work out his emancipation for himself. The best help she could give him was to show him that she entirely believed in his singleness of purpose, and would no more look narrowly at him to see if he lapsed from it than she would have tied him up like a dog that is liable to stray.

It took her long that morning to make herself feel convinced of the rightness of the attitude here indicated, and to bring herself into readiness to ignore all risks. But when Harry came back to lunch from the theatre, she welcomed him with absolute naturalness. There was no sign that any remembrance of last night remained in her mind, neither sighs, nor wan smiles, nor absent-mindedness, nor, on the other hand, effusive and unnatural geniality to mark the fact that she was making a bustling effort to forget. Such watery sunshine after storms is characteristic of those who, while generous enough not to nag, are not breezy enough to blow the clouds completely from their horizon. Their fault is not want of heart, but want of vigour. Eleanor in that respect could have blown away all the clouds that made the flood of Noah.

"Oh, Harry," she said; "me at a music-hall! How much in solid bullion would you give to see mamma's face, if she knew I was going to act at the 'alls?"

He took the letter she held out to him, looking a little shyly at her, with remembrance of last night.

"Half my goods," she said, "if not more."

He read it, but without a smile.

"I shouldn't take it, Nellie," he said, "though five pounds a night does seem pretty good for a ten minutes' turn, considering you have in all your life only been on the stage for about half an hour. Lord! what geniuses—you and me—live in Mount Street!"

"Yes, don't we? aren't we? But you aren't seriously serious about it, Harry?"

"Indeed I am, though, as I say, I shouldn't do it. You've made a hit, Nellie, and there's no doubt about it. If you choose, you can use that hit to make a quantity of quite loud little taps in different directions. But I advise you to do nothing of the kind. Store yourself up till the opportunity comes for making another hit."

"But you speak as if I was an actress," she said—"regular professional, I mean."

Harry made a healthy inroad on his omelette before replying.

"Starved," he observed parenthetically. "Of course I speak like that. You have appeared three times only in a tiny part. But you acted it, and you made a big part of it, which it is. That has been a most wonderful short cut for you. It takes the place, if you care to follow it up, of a couple of years of patient climbing. It was stupendous luck, of course, getting it; but you used the luck, every ounce of it—you were fit for it. Louis, by the way, agrees with me; he talked to me about it in the interval of a most long and damnable rehearsal."

"Oh, how did it go?" she said. "What a pig I am not to have asked!"

"Quite badly. I'll tell you about that soon. He said he thought you should really make up your mind whether you are going on the stage or not. It has always been your ambition, you see, and if you intend to, you should work and work, and wait for the opportunity which always comes. If not, of course, there is no reason why you shouldn't do a turn at the music-halls if you care to, and can stand some of the very remarkable expressions of which mamma's face is capable."

Eleanor pushed her plate away, and put her elbows on the table.

"But you, Harry?"

"With regard to music-halls? I would sooner you didn't —personally, I mean. With regard to serious stage, 'Yes.' As your husband, Nellie, it's really impossible to say these things without seeming a pompous prig. But it would be just as pompous and also untrue if I said, 'While there is a crumb of bread in the house, or an ounce of strength left in Henry Whittaker, his wife shall never,' . . . etcetera. I believe you can do it, and I know you long to. That's quite enough for me. Think it over. But give an amiable negative to the music-halls, if you don't mind, in any case."

"And a year ago I was Elsie's governess!" said Eleanor.

"Yes, we've stepped along."

He got up, and came behind her chair.

"Lord, Nellie, what fun life is, when one doesn't make a brute and a cad of oneself!" he said.

That was a sufficiently direct allusion, and her mind darted like a released spring back from herself to him.

"Oh, Harry, it's dead and finished, and never happened," she said. "You must be as sure of it as I am. Tell me about the rehearsal."

"Come down this afternoon and see for yourself," said he.

"We start again at half-past two. I feel like a slave-driver making his gang toil at something perfectly useless and unneeded. They all work so hard, and the more they work the more unsightly the thing becomes. Louis is absolutely uninspired and very cross. Miss Anstruther is worse: she is a Christian martyr as well, suffering acutely with extraordinary patience. Last night she said she understood what I meant, and would do her best. This morning she was merely idiotic and lamblike. Really I don't know whether I had not better cut out all I did at Bracebridge, and let her have the part as I originally wrote it, and as she feels she can play it. But Louis is very strongly against it. He likes the part as it is."

"Perhaps she will be cleverer after lunch," said Eleanor. "We most of us are. Let us go down to the theatre now, Harry, though it is still early. "I'm not sure that the waiting for the play to begin isn't nicer than the play usually is when it has begun."

"Nothing can be so nasty as these rehearsals when they have begun," said he. "Also they never stop."

Marian Anstruther was in a somewhat complicated and dangerous frame of mind when she arrived at the theatre again after lunch. She had taken immense trouble with her part that morning, and the predominant motive for her pains had been her desire to please Harry. For her rather touching appeal for friendship to him last night was genuinely grounded, though it may be doubted whether she had much capacity for fulfilling her part in that rare and beautiful thing, a friendship, and only a friendship, between a man and a woman. To her imagination—and of that she had plenty—such a friendship seemed easily possible; but up till now, though she had often aroused passion, she had never made a friend. Women, it may be remarked, she detested, largely because she saw her own faults in them; while men, as has been remarked, were apt to become violent in their intimacy. She was more often, in fact, adored than liked, because liking, if it is to be kindled into the steady flame of friendship, demands a certain reasonableness, which she was lacking in; whereas adoration deals more with the imagination that is willing to swallow unreasonableness with pangs, perhaps, but without murmurs. At least, it is to be feared she was both greedy and jealous, in spite of her charm, and, unfortunately, passionless. The flames of others did not kindle her, even when it was she who had aroused them; she took without giving. And yet her desire to have a friend was quite genuine; only

she did not know that such an impulse is always barren unless the applicant, so to speak, recognizes the obligations of friendship in addition to collaring its dividends.

In the meantime she was interested and attracted by Harry to a degree quite unusual with her. She was also at the present moment more than usually on edge as regards Louis Grey. All morning, so she told herself, she had been doing her very best, and at the end all he had to say to her was this.

"We must get more life into it, Miss Anstruther. Our scene in the first act is like dough. We both know our words, but at present the words are nothing more than words.

He had bracketed himself into the failure, but she knew perfectly well what he meant. It was formula, just as is a doctor's when he says, "How are we this morning?" to a child, when he means, "How are you?"

They started with the second act in the afternoon, and slowly, but uniformly, matters went from bad to worse. Harry, with Eleanor by him, was seated in a row of stalls not far from the stage, and after a while Eleanor scarcely dared to look at him. Eventually, after Louis and Miss Anstruther had been through the long scene between them, Louis left it alone, and with the rest of the company ran through the remainder of the act. That went more encouragingly; it was light, witty, carefully woven. At the end he went and spoke to Miss Anstruther.

"Shall we give the rest of the afternoon to trying to get our scene better?" he asked.

"Certainly; anything you please," she said.

He called a rehearsal for the next morning, and then the rest of the company departed.

"Now, Miss Anstruther, please," he said.

Again they began their scene. Louis, for his part, tried to put some life into it, but about her there was something both simpering and solid, that made acting impossible. After five minutes he stopped again, still trying to be patient, and to keep the ring of exasperation out of his voice.

"Let us begin again," he said.

She looked up, and saw Harry and Eleanor whispering together in the stalls, and knew for certain that they were talking about her. That increased her irritation tenfold. Perhaps Eleanor was telling Harry that Miss Anstruther was trying so hard. The breaking-point was near.

Louis said his opening lines and waited. Then he repeated her cue.

"We can always make the worst and the best of bad jobs and good alike," she began woodenly.

Louis lost control of himself, and made a gesture of despair. That was enough.

"I can't do the part," she said; "I throw it up. It is quite useless my trying. Good-night."

And, without another word, she marched straight off the stage.

Louis waited till she had quite gone. Then he came forward to the footlights.

"Will you take the part of Stella, Mrs. Whittaker?" he said. "I offer it you now."

Eleanor had clasped her hand on Harry's arm in sympathy when Miss Anstruther made her sudden exit. It had all been very painful: she was sorry for Miss Anstruther, for Louis, most of all for Harry. She still gripped him tightly.

"But, Mr. Grey," she said, "it is only a—a little crisis. She will tell you she didn't mean it: she will do it excellently. . . ."

"But I mean it," he said. "She has thrown up the part. I accept that. It is quite true: she can't do it, and it is no use her trying to."

"But, Mr. Grey . . . Harry," she said.

"I will come round and talk to you," said Grey.

"But, Harry, what am I to do?" she asked. "Does he mean it?"

"Certainly he means it. But I didn't expect this for a moment, Nellie. The possibility of it, even, wasn't in my mind when I said a few hours ago to you that opportunities always came."

Eleanor still felt utterly bewildered, and looked helplessly at Louis when he joined them.

"You mustn't think you are taking the part away from Miss Anstruther," he said. "I should have to find somebody else."

"But if Harry altered it—made it as it was before?" suggested she.

"I should not do the play," he said.

It was hard for him to keep calm. During these two days of nightmare rehearsal the thought of Eleanor herself, on whom the character had been remodelled, had been an obsession to him. He believed her to be made for the part, just as the part had been made for her. He cared not two straws for her lack of experience, for he knew that she was the rarest of phenomena—an actress by nature—just as others are prigs or athletes by nature. Already she had shown she was able to teach herself a part—little, it is true, but all of which required to be learned. There was no fear that she could not learn one

in which the spirit was hers already. But it was not this that excited him; it was that he would be playing with her. As actor he longed to do that, as man also.

She turned from him to Harry.

"Choose for me," she said.

"Take it," said he.

His decision, genuine in its main reason—namely, that this was an opportunity for Eleanor for which all her ambitions might have been obliged to wait for years—was honestly dictated. It gave her what she had longed for, what he, too, believed she could make into a career. But the moment his word was spoken, he saw what incidentally it gave him—namely, a certain freedom from which his better nature revolted, but which his weakness desired. He did not specify to himself what he would do with the added freedom that her occupation would give him; he only noted that she would be busy. He by no means planned the evenings which he would have alone, because she would be acting; no design came into his head. It would still be delightful to welcome her home. . . . But—for instance, he felt the appeal for friendship which had been made to him. It would not be very easy for Miss Anstruther to meet Eleanor just at present. It would be awkward for them both, but for himself there was no awkwardness. All this, however, was as faint as summer lightning on the horizon; it was all subconscious, uncalculated.

Eleanor turned to Louis Grey again, after her husband's answer, tremulously radiant.

"Then I will try," she said. "Oh, Mr. Grey, may we begin at once? I know the play backwards and forwards, of course. Will you coach me in that big scene which you were trying over just now? If I am to be in rehearsal with the rest to-morrow, hadn't I better begin to learn the stage at once?"

She unpinned her hat, and dropped it into the stall in which she had been sitting.

"I must learn the size of the stage," she said, "and the furniture, and where is the chair in which I sit, and where is the sofa. Do let me begin."

She anticipated no denial of it now. He followed her through the door of communication, and next moment they both appeared on the stage, while Harry still sat in the stalls.

And then the two started off at once on to the scene that had swallowed hours of fruitless rehearsal. Eleanor knew the words—his and hers, as she had said—backwards and forwards; she knew also, so it appeared, the spirit that animated it all. All her mistrust of herself vanished; she was an

eager worker, void of self-consciousness, intent only on the representation of a situation. Often Louis stopped her. "Get back as you say that," he would suggest; "you have to take up the letter as you are speaking." But nearly as often it was she who stopped him. "Wouldn't it be better," she said, "if you crossed behind me? Just for the moment, you see, it's ME. I can't make my faces with any effect if you are standing in front of me. You *must* make it as easy for me as you can." Once she forgot his cue, and she prompted him wrongly. "I'm quite wrong," she said, "but, Harry, would you just change the first two words? You have two identical cues following one on the other. If I said"—she thought a moment—"if I said 'I doubt it' instead of 'I do not believe it,' it would be all right. As it is, I say, 'I do not believe it' twice."

She did not ask; she commanded.

"Yes, much better," said Harry.

"Then, may we go back, Mr. Grey?" she asked. "Yes, I speak—'I doubt it.'"

The end of the duologue came immediately after, and Eleanor ceased to be Stella.

"I will do better than that, Mr. Grey," she said. "But I can't believe it at present. Is Harry still there? Harry, I must have one more sentence. I've got to cross the stage and get out. It is stupid if I do it in silence. There's no need for silence. Anything will do—bicycle, garden, whatever you like—just a word of passage."

She was Stella again without transition.

"Just something," she said. "You see, it is 'Poor things, they don't know,' and after that no speech until the sound of my heavy feet has taken me to the other side."

Harry bit his pencil.

"Say it as you go," he said.

"I can't, silly. I have to shake hands as I exit, and Mr. Grey is right over here. May I say, 'They only guess?' I could say that. Three steps, do you see; then, 'They only guess.' And it is to the point also. Then exit ME."

"Right," said Harry. "Will you wait for her to say that, Louis?"

"And now may we go through it all again from the beginning, Mr. Grey?" she said. "Or are you tired?"

It was duly announced in the theatrical columns of the morning press next day that Miss Anstruther's part in the forthcoming production would be taken by Miss Ramsden, who, as all the world knew, was the wife of the author, which

meant that Dramaticus, and Stagicus, and Theatricus, and other contributors had seen it in the evening papers of the day before, so that they had known it for quite a long while. And after breakfast, as she glanced through her paper, Miss Anstruther saw the paragraph.

She had expected all the evening before, after she had left the theatre, to be rung up on the telephone by Grey, asking if he might come and see her, and was surprised not to have had some communication from him. It had not occurred to her as possible that he would not beg her to resume her part, and she was even prepared with the terms on which she would be willing to do so—namely, that the character should be returned to the original conception. She took it for granted that the play could not proceed without her, and consequently there was an admirable opportunity for getting her way. Then came the three lines in the morning paper.

She was one of those gifted people who are capable of sitting down to think. Most of the world are far too scattered of brains to follow out any line of thought, and to construct without wanderings of wits any programme of policy. For a little while she was in too enraged a mind to trace her course; she flew inconsecutively from one point to another. But before long she collected herself, and thought, still and silent, for some minutes. Then she wrote a note—a perfectly charming one—to Harry. It ran as follows:

"DEAR MR. HARRY,

"I ought to be whipped, oughtn't I? for an outburst that must have seemed to you so childish and uncontrolled. But I was at my wits' end, and it was not till I had struggled and struggled with the part that I recognized the hopelessness of my attempting it. But I can't do it, and I must simply throw myself on your mercy, and hope that you will forgive me. I don't want to lose my friend as well as my salary. (Fancy comparing them!)

"Now I am going to make a suggestion, and before you reject it you must think it over very carefully. Can't you persuade your wife to take the part? You told me you modelled it on her, so she might find it easy to give it that note which I couldn't give it. I saw her one evening as the Rat-Wife (as we all did), and she was splendid. Of course, this is a big part, and the other was a little one, but try to persuade her.

"If you can, suggest it to Mr. Grey. Don't tell him I thought of it, because that might set him against it, as he is probably furious with me. Will you come and see me some

time, and tell me what has been settled ? It may seem to you strange that I should take the slightest interest in it, since all I have done was to spoil it, but I do. Oh, don't be very cross with me.

" Sincerely yours,
" MARIAN ANSTRUTHER."

She read it through, found not a word to alter, and posted it.

To say that this note gave Harry pleasure would be a ludicrous understatement of its effect. It arrived after dinner that night, when he and Eleanor were sitting together in his study. She, but a moment before, had been wondering if there was no approach to be made to Miss Anstruther, and had been urging Harry to write some line of sympathy to her, explaining—but there lay the difficulty : there was nothing to explain. At the moment the post came in, and he opened her letter. He gave one glance at the signature.

" It's from her," he said, and began it, not without apprehension. Then his face changed altogether, and he ran through it quickly.

" Oh, Nellie," he said, " it's the nicest letter ! I didn't know a woman could be so generous. And she thought of it herself—your taking the part, I mean. I'll read it to you."

The effect on Eleanor was hardly less than on him.

" That does relieve my mind," she said. " What a nice woman ! You told me she was nice, and I said I wasn't sure. What a beast I am ! Shall I answer it, Harry, and ask her here, and thank her ? You must, too, but she might like a line from me also. And I think we ought to tell Mr. Grey, because I know he thinks she was outrageous."

Harry looked at the letter again.

" Better not," he said, " as she doesn't wish it."

It was true ; she did not.

Three nights later an evening rehearsal had been arranged, and after an early dinner Eleanor drove down to the theatre, leaving Harry to dine with Marian Anstruther. This had been arranged before it was known there was to be this rehearsal, and an agitated exchange of telephone messages resulted in her coming all the same ; for Eleanor would be back by ten, before the evening grew old.

To her these days had passed in the exhilaration of passionate work ; she had risen, as Grey had felt sure she would, to her opportunity, and hour by hour she grew in inspiration. Her memory for gestures, for pauses, for inflection of voice and phrasing of sentences was admirable ; and she seemed to

have realized instinctively that she had to know all those by heart, so that what came to her as a fit mode of expression or was suggested by him had to be reproduced faithfully and exactly, but without losing its original vitality. She saw that the whole complex action on the stage was like that of an orchestra—each player an instrument—that the power and expression of each instrument in each phrase must be settled and rigidly adhered to, else the balance of the whole would be lost, and the effect be made unstable. The artistic nature, sensitive and vibrating, was hers; hers, also, was its capacity for being trained—being made subject to the reins and spur of the intellect.

It was with a strange excitement that Louis Grey saw this wonderful growth and blossoming, and, devoted as he was to his art, he knew that it was not his professional emotions alone that were raised. Had she turned out to be incapable of acting, it would still have been an incomparable pleasure to act with her. That he was falling in love with her he had no doubt whatever; certain intimate moments in their scenes together were beginning to have an almost terrible significance for him, and he acted them, he knew, with a power that had been beyond him up till now, for now the strength of his inspiration came from her. What made this spell the more potent was that her part was so accurate a delineation of her own self, and her growing dramatic power made every day the impersonation of herself the more complete and natural. That maddened and fascinated him; for at one moment he was, in the action of the play, to hold her in his arms, but the next moment the scene was over, and it was Harry's wife who smiled at him with innocence and utter unconsciousness. She had not the smallest notion that anything beside dramatic sincerity inspired the fervour of his acting; the situation, otherwise, would have been impossible to her. Nor did she wonder at the tremendous force of his playing, for to her own self nothing in the world was more real than the mimic life of the theatre. If his voice trembled, or if once or twice his grasp hurt her, she only strove to stimulate herself the more, so that she could rise to his level. Always, in his rehearsals, he required that after the caste was word-perfect, the whole company should act as if an actual representation was going on; but, it must be granted, these particular practisings attained a very unusual degree of vividness.

Miss Anstruther, who arrived at the flat in Mount Street shortly after Eleanor's departure to the theatre, seemed to be the faithful incarnation of the spirit that had inundated her letter. Already she had ceased to be "drawing-room com-

pany," and he received her in the room where he and Eleanor always sat. She came in with both hands outstretched.

"But how nice of you and your wife to let me come just the same," she said. "But I shall see her before I go back?"

"If you can bear me alone till ten," said he.

She looked with frowning anxiety at the clock.

"Quarter-past eight, quarter-past nine," she said. "I don't know how I can last it out, but I'll do my best, as I did the other day, with such charming results. But did ever spite and rage and incompetence turn out so well? Do tell me! How is the dear impossible-for-me play going? Does your wife like her part? I know she can do it, as surely as I know I couldn't."

"It is generosity and kindliness that turned out so well," said he.

She just put the tips of her fluted fan-sticks to her lips. A very faint odour of violets came from them.

"Hush!" she said. "We haven't got to the nonsense period of the evening yet. We must talk sense till—till—pudding-time, shall we say?"

"I was talking sense. I was awfully touched; so was Eleanor."

She looked at him a moment, then let her eyes drop.

"She wrote me a charming little note," she said, "as open and sincere as—as a daisy. And I am sure she deserves all the luck she is getting, which means a good deal. She will make a great success of this; she will vault over us all. And then she has her own life as well: I suspect she's just as lucky in that."

Clearly the nonsensical conversation had begun. Harry laughed.

"I am not so sure of that," he said. "I have a capacity for giving trouble that would astonish you."

"Ah, but women like their men giving trouble," she said. "That is what men are for."

"Take them all round, they seem to fulfil their purpose, then," said he.

"Yes, bless them! What sort of trouble do you give? Do you stay out too late, and come home tipsy?"

It was better to laugh at this.

"All that sort of thing," he said.

They had passed into the dining-room without pause in their talk; she had merely taken his arm when they were told dinner was ready, and leaned a little on it.

"Who is it says that very acute thing about men and

women ?" she asked. "How that women are vain and frivolous and dishonourable, and men are brutal and greedy and cruel, and yet it is from the combination of those vile animals that there comes the most beautiful thing in the world ?"

"Surely a Frenchman said it. Most Englishmen think that the most beautiful thing in the world is politics or killing things."

"If we are to decry our sexes, then," said she, "I should add that most women think the most beautiful thing in the world is bonnets and clothes."

"Isn't there an idea that they like clothes in order that men may admire them the more ?"

"Yes, but it is a mistaken one," said she. "Women's passion for clothes is partly vanity, partly the luxury of being envied by other women. They don't think of their husbands and admirers when they are concerned with clothes. Otherwise they would all glue their faces to the windows of tailors and men's outfitters, and think how lovely Tom and Dick would look in such a striped shirt and blue tie. Nor do they think about their children, and stare in at the shops where baby-clothes are sold. No ; the ordinary woman, out for a walk, hurries between the dressmakers, and stops like a Parliamentary train at each, in order to imagine herself in the opera-cloak, or the apricot-coloured blouse, or the skirt with the silver embroidery on it. She's not thinking of her husband, except if the question of the bill occurs to her, which in general it does not."

"Yet there is another side to your French definition," said Harry. "Women are patient and unselfish and generous, and men are brave and honourable and loyal. It is out of their qualities, not the defects of them, that the beautiful thing comes."

She laughed.

"Well, as long as we get it," she said, "we don't ask many questions as to where it comes from."

"Nor mind if it is stolen goods," said he.

"Not a bit. We are all thieves when we want a thing enough. Oh, Mr. Harry, you said you stayed out too late and got tipsy, and you are refusing this nice bubbly champagne. I cannot drink champagne by myself."

"I hardly ever touch it," said he.

"Then either make an exception, or let me have some water instead," she said.

It was absurd to refuse ; he would be committing a rudeness

to his guest. Also to-night he longed for that thawing and unloosing of his brain more keenly, perhaps, than ever before.

"The woman tempted me, and I did drink," he remarked.

"But it's so much nicer than apple-juice," said she.

The feeling of the freedom that Eleanor's occupation would give him began to take more definite shape. Those delicious evenings which he had so often spent with her, working sometimes, sometimes idling, which through work and idleness alike were instinct with her presence and all that meant to him, had lost none of their remembered sweetness, but it was a new and emphatically a very keen pleasure to be with this beautiful and brilliant woman, who had shown herself so generous a friend, and who had appealed in a manner that could not fail to touch him for his friendship. There was that in her to which his nature answered: she stimulated him, she excited him, her charm allured him, and her wonderful kindliness over the play endeared her to him. Somehow, when first he came in contact with her, the violence of her moods had repelled him, or, if antipathy was too strong a word, he had felt, at any rate, that she was not "his sort." But with her alone, both a week ago and now, she seemed to have put away all violence. It but existed superficially; it was but the armour with which she met the hardness and enmity of life; below lay this beautiful nature. If you knew her only a little, if she liked you only a little, she turned another side to you. Louis, for instance, had conjectured heartlessness for her. Already that seemed a guess so wide of the mark that it was hardly credible that it was this target he aimed at. It was clear he did not know her at all, in the sense that he himself already did.

She played on her own personality, as a violinist plays on his instrument: of its harshness and stringency she showed him nothing; in her own deft handling she was all *cantabile;* she was a song. Yet she never melted into sentimentality or was sugary in tone, for that might have put him on his guard. She told him of her past life, its struggles and ambitions. She edited the volume of her marriage and then took up the thread of the present again. It was very likely true that, as she had said, she could act no part that was not herself, but she could present such aspects of herself as she wished with astonishing realism. A man must have been revoltingly suspicious to have questioned her sincerity, and suspicion was not more akin to his mood than was arson. And then she took one tentative step into the future.

"So you see I am tremendously eager to succeed," she said, taking up the thread of the present; "for certainly the joy

of work has lost none of its rapture to me. Of course, every actor in London is clamouring for your work—we do clamour, I know—but some time, Mr. Harry, do you think you could write me a play ?"

The suggestion seemed to him brilliant ; her step was tentative no longer.

" But I could," he said, " and I can, and I will. I should love to write a play for you."

" Thanks, dear sparrow," said she.

He laughed.

" I can't call you ' dear cat,' " he said.

Pudding-time, the time for nonsense, had already struck its hour, and they sat with coffee served.

" No ; the cat and the sparrow have had their innings," she said.

" Well, then, Miss Marian," said he.

An unwise impulse urged her to say, " Why ' Miss ' ?" but she checked it.

" That will do," she said. " And Miss Marian wants to act a beautiful part written for her by you."

" You are going to take a theatre ?" he asked.

" I am prepared to if I can get a play."

" You will not act with Louis again, do you mean ?" he asked.

She stabbed at the sugar in the bottom of her cup.

" No. I needn't go into all the reasons. They were but brought to a head the other day. Not for a moment do I say that he has behaved badly to me—you mustn't think, even, that I mean that. I know that the conventional view is that women may say all they choose about men, but a man must never give away a woman. But women's tongues ought to be tied equally."

She made an excellent gesture of impatience at herself.

" I am quite a fool," she said. " That sounds as if I could say things, but that I don't wish to. Don't think that. Where were we ? Yes : I don't intend to play with Louis Grey again. That is all. Shall we say that we find each other impossible ?"

She could not have given the impression she meant to convey more brilliantly. She did not know whether Louis had ever talked to Harry about her or not, but she had made it quite certain that Harry would not talk to him about her in the future. Also, if Louis had given any hint in the past, she had discounted it with a vengeance. If, by chance, he had been ungenerous, she, on her higher plane, but looked down incuriously. It did not matter what happened then. But

Harry was loyal to him in his weak way, as well as trustful of her.

"Let us leave it like that, then," he said.

But her attitude seemed to him unboundedly admirable. It was woven, too, of the same fine stuff as the generosity of her attitude towards Eleanor. Warmed with wine and rather subtle flattery, he found himself thinking that she had a great nature.

He made a vivid movement as of dismissal of this subject.

"The play," he said—"the play I shall write for you. One has to begin talking about it some time. Why not now?"

She laughed with unassumed, unreserved pleasure. This impulsive, eager young man, a year or two her junior, had a very vivid attraction for her.

"Oh, you adorable boy!" she said. "That shall be your name, for it really describes you. You are just 'Boy.'"

The name was not amiss: wine, the stimulus of her company, the sense of gratified sensation gave him an extraordinary youthfulness and sparkle of face.

"But I'm old, antique, a seasoned cynical playwright," he said.

"Eighteen next birthday. Tell me, how do you write? Do you sit down stolidly after breakfast, and write all morning, so many pages, so many words? Words! Just fancy! I know a dreadful novelist who writes two thousand words a day, and when he has finished he plays patience. As if it was not enough to write one word a day, provided it was *the* word. No, I don't see you sitting down at ten o'clock, with orders not to be disturbed till one. I see you much more easily sitting down at the other ten o'clock, because your moods are working in a sort of frenzy till any o'clock at all. Do write my play like that. I'm sure you wrote 'The Dilemma' like that."

Again they had moved back into his room, without pause or break in their talk, and sat side by side on the sofa.

"Yes, that's how I like to work," he said.

"So of course you do."

He shook his head.

"No, I try to work the other way," he said. "I expect that really the best and solidest work comes in the dull morning way; only, for me at any rate, it is harder to do. You see, it can't be very good for one, sitting up, and perhaps smoking a lot, and—and drinking whisky-and-soda, and going to bed at any hour of the morning——"

"But, who wants it to be good for you, Boy?" she asked. "You've got this wonderful gift of making plays, and it's

your business to make them. You must make them under the conditions you find most suitable. Stop smoking after you have finished your play, and have your lemonade, and go to bed at half-past nine. But what does it matter if you feel cheap in the morning as long as you have got some work done—real work—made something to exist."

Already she suspected part of the truth: it occurred to her as possible that this vivid boy, writing, as she felt sure he did, like a Bacchanal, had drunk too much one night, and had had no end of a blowing-up from that great piece of asparagus with golden hair.

"And who wants solid work?" she asked. "There is too much solid work already. It is the winged stuff we want, that glistens in the sun, and makes us laugh with pleasure to look upon it. You can give me that, if you will accept the inexorable conditions of production. Larks can't sing in a cage; kites can't go up unless there is a wind; and why should an artist expect to be able to work under all conditions? You aren't a clerk in a bank, who can add up figures whatever mood he is in."

He listened eagerly, knowing all the time that for him this was dangerous doctrine.

"You really think that?" he said.

"I don't think it at all. I know it, Boy. Some people can produce the most inspired work with great seriousness and conscientiousness of aim. Others have to get rid of all sense of responsibility before they can do anything. But, whatever your conditions for work are, it is certain that you have to comply with them!"

For the moment he was tempted to tell her, wishing rather that when she knew she would take the view that Eleanor had taken rather than encourage him in what he knew was mad indulgence; but it was beyond him to say, "I work best when I am soaking myself with spirits." He did not know that essentially she had guessed his secret, and did not care two straws whether he worked best drunk or sober.

"But cannot you force your mind to work under any conditions you choose to impose on it?" he asked.

"Oh yes; it will work; it will add up figures," she said. "It might write a sermon or serve on the London County Council. Very useful."

At this moment the door opened, and Eleanor entered. Again both rose to greet her; again—and with greater force than on the former occasion—she had the sense of causing an interruption.

CHAPTER XIII

For once there was complete unanimity in the London Press; they hailed the new star that had risen last night with entire cordiality. A hit was too weak a word to express their estimate of Miss Ramsden's acting; she had given them an absolute knock-out, and long paragraphs completely about her left them, it appeared, still silly at the end. But, lest it should seem that the millennium had set in, they disagreed with unusual discord over the play itself. It was mawkish and sentimental, touching and human; it was strong; it was weak; it was a notable advance on Mr. Whittaker's first play; it was a lamentable falling-off. The first act promised well—the first act was nothing but the merest twaddle; the second act was a great disappointment after the excellent first act—the second act was perhaps the finest second act ever produced. Its comedy was admirable—its attempts at wit were degrading; its dialogue was sparkling—its dialogue was ditch-water. The third act dazzled and satisfied profoundly—it wasn't a third act at all, but was a dinner-table richly decorated, but with nothing to eat. It affected the house profoundly—it set the house yawning. It must be severely cut to render it tolerable—it left you gasping at the tremendous speed and fire of it. There were ten plays in that one act—there was not the smallest dramatic interest. The whole play, in fact, had a very mixed reception, and it was received with unbounded enthusiasm. But—and they all agreed again—Miss Ramsden met with a tremendous ovation.

But Miss Ramsden alone knew how narrowly her triumph had been saved from disaster. Her call came some ten minutes after the beginning of the act, and she waited by the door where she would make her entrance, feeling superbly happy and confident. Her cue came, and she entered. And then, quite suddenly, she was seized with the panic of stage-fright. She saw Louis, and knew that she had to advance towards him and say her first words. She saw the row of footlights and the packed stalls beyond, and she could neither

move nor speak, but felt her knees making tattoo against each other. She did not know why she was there or why anybody else was there; they and she alike were as meaningless as figures in a dream. She heard the prompter say something, and recognized the opening of her own speech, but it, too, meant nothing. And then she looked up to the stage box. Nearest the stage was her stepmother, next came her father, then Miss Anstruther, then Harry. Harry was looking at her as if he was made of stone, absolutely motionless. Miss Anstruther was smiling—as if to encourage her, was it? Then she turned to Harry, and whispered something. Eleanor felt she knew exactly what it was. She felt sure she was saying, "What is the matter with her?" And as she felt that the awful spell that bound her broke. She put her head a little back, thrusting the chin forward, the delicious irregular smile came into her face, and she spoke in that tender, slightly husky voice that carried with ease up to the last row of the pit and gallery. The words were absolutely simple.

"Such a dance of daffodils down by the lake," she said. "It is spring at last."

It was not only her voice that carried so well: it was she who carried.

She swept her audience away. A fortnight ago, as Rat-Wife, she had taken them into the weird, vague twilight where dwell the uncanny forces of the world; now she brought them spring with the mating of birds and blooming of flowers. She created the atmosphere of youth and budding romance, and one critic decided to begin his critique (which he did) by saying "Perdita has been born again," while another made a mental note of "It is April, and Primavera has come among us" (which also he remembered to reproduce). To the end of the act she never released the house from her enchantment.

The curtain fell on her and Louis, and as soon as it was down, he came across to her.

"You've got them," he said.

Eleanor took a moment to divest herself of Stella and become herself.

"What?" she said.

"It's splendid; it's magnificent," he said, raising his voice to be heard above the din on the other side of the curtain.

"Oh, is it really?" she asked. "How glorious for Harry! I knew they would like it."

He signed to the curtain controller.

"It's going up," he said. "We'll take this call together."

Once more the panic seized her.

"Oh, I can't, Mr. Grey," she said. "Besides, it is you they want."

He laughed.

"You must wait," he said. "We shall see about that." He led her to the front of the stage, and both bowed to the house. Then he dropped her hand, bowed to her, and a roar that made the earlier applause seem faint rose from the audience. For a moment Eleanor did not understand, and turned to him, puzzled. But shouts of "Stella" enlightened her.

The British public is slow to praise, but when it gets what it wants, it will acknowledge the fact without reserve. It is chary of encouragement to those who need it, and delights in belittling an ordinary success into the ranks of failures; but when once it is hit fair and square, it extravagantly confesses its delight at being bowled over. Eleanor's triumph mounted, and even after she, Harry, and Louis had appeared singly and together at the end, the audience insisted on having her alone once more. Nothing else would do.

Mrs. Ramsden distinguished herself by being a dissentient voice. It is not meant that she hissed and booed, but she kept her head amid the enthusiasm, and discussed cold supper and Eleanor with equal eagerness when she and her husband got back to the hotel. The moment it was known that Eleanor was going on the stage, she had urged her husband to assert his authority and forbid her; and when he very reasonably remarked that he had no authority over her, nor would he exert it if he had, Mrs. Ramsden had to be content with presentiments of dismal failure. These, it must be confessed, were somewhat broken now, but she picked up, so to speak, the fragments that remained, which certainly would have filled ten of the very largest baskets.

"Well, I am sure I hope Eleanor will have a good supper," she said; "for she must be in need of it after that long play, in which she had to say so much. I do not know what you thought of it, James, and certainly the audience were very much pleased, but to me she did not seem to be acting at all. She just spoke and did things as she might have in the Vicarage at home."

"That is the highest possible tribute you can give her, my dear," said he.

Mrs. Ramsden put her hand up to her forehead, and considered this with an eager smile.

"Ah, I see what you mean," she said. "You mean that Harry wrote the part for her, so that there was no acting to be done. I am sure that was very clever of him, but it is a tribute to Harry, is it not? Or am I very stupid?"

"I think you do not quite understand," said he. "Dear Nellie's genius was shown in the fact that she made her part seem absolutely natural. And, if you remember, it was not written for her at all."

"No; but it was altered so as to be like her. Harry was working at it at Christmas, when he used to sit up so late and not go to church."

"I am going to order some champagne to drink dear Nellie's health," remarked he blandly.

"Certainly, my dear. I am sure I will join in it most readily. And we must wish also that she will not be spoiled and have her head turned."

"We all wish that," said he.

The champagne arrived, and put further bright thoughts into Mrs. Ramsden's head.

"I am sure I don't know where Eleanor gets that queer twist in her mouth," she said. "I should have it seen to, if I was she. It makes her look affected, which I am sure she is not. She looked to me very thin to-night."

"I am glad to say I thought her the picture of health, my dear," said he.

"That makes my mind much more easy. Thank you, James, for telling me that. I have been trying to remember that French word for all the people who are given places in the theatre in order to applaud."

"Claque?" he suggested.

"That is it. I suppose they have it at all theatres. The applause seemed to me to come from one particular corner of the house, in the dress circle just opposite us. Dear Eleanor! I have no doubt she knew nothing about that, and I would not spoil her pleasure by suggesting it. How quickly actors come back, do they not, to bow, if anybody claps their hands! Papa always used to say that there should be no applause at the theatre, and no reappearance of the actors afterwards, as it takes away from the reality of the play. What do you think about that, James?"

"Surely, my dear, it is a pleasant custom," said he. "If we have had a delightful evening, we want to thank those who have given it us."

"That would be very well if we had not paid for our seats.

[illegible] we must expect our amusement or improvement."

[illegible] mildly exasperated.

"[illegible] pay for our seats, my dear," he said. "[illegible]"

[illegible] picked up all the fragments. [illegible] however.

"[illegible] Alice," she said. "She would [illegible] when Eleanor came on at the [illegible] able to speak or move. And I [illegible] that it is the sort of play I should like her [illegible] that the young man was in love with [illegible] I should like Alice to be in ignorance [illegible] I shall go to bed, James. We [illegible] do we not! That will be a [illegible] I need not be nervous about it, as there is [illegible] a complete failure."

[illegible] was late this year, and a fortnight of crowded [illegible] with Wednesday and Saturday matinées, intervened [illegible] Grey closed the theatre for the week preceding [illegible] Sunday. Probably such closure would never have [illegible] had it not been that Eleanor clearly never [illegible] acting during that week. In previous years [illegible] as far as he remembered, up till the Thursday, and [illegible] again on Monday, but the question of acting during [illegible] week at all was never discussed between them. She had [illegible] her plans to go down to Bracebridge from Monday till Monday, merely assuming that there was no idea of performances then, and he felt that he would sooner have trampled on a child than questioned her assumption. At the same time, he was a little puzzled about it, for she alluded to her proposed holiday oddly one evening just before the holidays, when he supped at their flat in Mount Street. Harry was there; there were just the three of them. Eleanor was in spirits that must be described as huge; success suited her admirably.

"What a pity the early Fathers of the Church didn't put all the festivals together in a week, as they have it at Leeds and Sheffield!" she said. "Wouldn't it be heavenly? There would be Christmas and the two holidays to follow, and then [illegible] Epiphany straight off, and then Holy Week and Easter [illegible] and two more holidays, and then Whitsunday and [illegible] one. It wouldn't be a week; it would be about three,

and we should have done it all! Or did Christmas really happen in December, and Easter about April? What a pity that not one of the Apostles kept a diary!"

For a moment Louis Grey, to whom the festivals of the Christian Church meant exactly as much as the birthdays of the gods and goddesses of ancient Athens, felt that Eleanor, for some reason, had spoken blasphemy against what she believed. It had seemed to her quite impossible, not even to be contemplated, to act in Holy Week, and yet somehow she could speak like this. And his astonishment betrayed itself in speech.

"So your feasts do not seem much to you?" he asked.

Eleanor looked at him in astonishment that more than equalled his.

"Good gracious, they do!" she said. "But that does not prevent their being tiresome. It is absolutely horrid to me to have to stop acting now. But of course I wouldn't act in Holy Week, for—for anything. Mr. Grey, you weren't even thinking of that, were you?"

"Lots of theatres keep open till Thursday," said Harry.

"Do they, darling?" asked she. "Well, I think it's disgusting, though of course it would be much more convenient if we did all the big days together. But fancy not keeping them! Oh, Harry I think you are a base deserter not to come down home with me."

"But you begged me not to," he said.

Eleanor laughed.

"I know I did, and I hoped you would insist on coming," she said. "No, dear, it's no use insisting now. If you go down to Bracebridge, I shan't, and papa would sooner have me there than you."

"But mamma wouldn't," said he.

She laughed again.

"No; mamma can't bear me. But she's got to. Besides, you are going to stop here and work tremendously hard. Oh, dear, I don't look forward to this week. Church every morning with enormous epistles and gospels. Then Good-Friday, with a three hours' service, and papa preaching seven little sermons with a hymn between each—every two, isn't it, grammatically? I've never missed one yet, as far as I can remember, except when I fell asleep. The old darling says all he has got to say in the first three, and then he has to make four more. Then on Saturday there is a midnight service, and before you have in the least recovered from Friday, it is Sunday. Everybody is so cross on Sunday

evening, because they are all simply tired out. But you must keep birthdays and other days, you know. You wouldn't like it a bit if you didn't."

Some glimmerings of purpose began to appear in what Louis Grey had thought meaningless ritual. Eleanor could talk profanely, so it seemed at first, about these things : at the best it was only a sort of custom that appeared to dictate the observance of tiresome days. But then a light broke. Tiresome though they might be, they were anniversaries : they represented something to her which was in her heart. Very possibly the observance depended largely on upbringing, but no inconvenience in the observance suggested to her, ever so faintly, the thought of discarding it. She could not discard the observance of that which represented a vital fact. Her mention of birthdays humanized it and explained it to him, and he knew that it was without mental transition on her part that without pause she talked of other birthdays.

"Mamma's, for instance," she said. "Wasn't it awful of me ? I knew it was mamma's birthday last Wednesday, and didn't write to her in the morning, because I was dreadfully busy, thinking I would telegraph late. And then—well, I just forgot, until the middle of the second act, when I had to say the word 'birthday.' And then I got so excited over the play, that at the end of the act I forgot again. Oh, Harry, it is a good act."

"And you are going to stop up for Easter, working ?" asked Louis of him. "New play ?"

Harry glanced with a little impatience at his wife. He had not meant her to mention this. But a direct answer was better than evasion, since the fact was there.

"Yes, I'm writing a play for Marian Anstruther," he said.

Eleanor had caught and interpreted his look.

"Harry, you didn't mind my saying it, did you ?" she asked.

Somehow that irritated him further, but his irritation, since it was quite unreasonable, could not be expressed.

"Not in the least," he said. "Louis was bound to know."

Louis could not see the reason for this roughness.

"But I am delighted," he said. "It is true she kicked herself out of 'The April Morning,' but of course I am glad that you hope to give her a good play. I annoyed her somehow, I am afraid."

Harry was in arms for her quite unnecessarily.

"I hope you don't think she expressed her annoyance to

me," he said. "She entirely refused to do so. Indeed, she said she had no complaint against you at all."

He had to answer this.

"But of course she had not," he said.

For all three there suddenly was born an uncomfortable situation. Harry was defending a woman for whom, as far as either of the other two knew, no defence was necessary. Louis was justifying himself, when no justification was needed; Eleanor heard her husband championing a woman whose generosity had been amply acknowledged by her with confidence and admittance to intimacy. She tried to relieve the situation.

"Harry has been flirting outrageously with Marian," she said, "and I'm not a bit jealous. Isn't it lucky? She's a dear, whatever either of you may think. But I'm sure you both think so too, and if somebody, preferably Mr. Grey, since his cigarettes are the nicest, doesn't give me one, I shall expire, and Harry won't be able to write any play at all, because widowers cease doing anything for a year afterwards. Oh, thanks, Mr. Grey! Now Harry can go on with his play. It is going to be so good. And I'm going to be jealous of Marian's acting it, because I couldn't. That will pay her out for not being jealous of me in being able to act what she couldn't. Harry, don't go to sleep."

Harry gave an immense yawn.

"But I want to go to sleep," he said. "I want to go to bed. I got up at six this morning."

"To write Marian's play," explained Eleanor. "He says the morning hours are the best. Personally I hate them!"

"You've never tried them," said he.

"But what libel! You told me I used to awake you by repeating the second act!"

"Yes; but you never awoke yourself. Do you know, I shall go to bed. If I flirt with Miss Marian, I give you opportunity to flirt with Louis. That is only fair. But don't flirt loudly, Nellie, or you will wake me. And be quite sure you put the electric light out."

To her this was the merest nonsense, it meant nothing whatever; to him it meant nearly nothing, to Louis it had a meaning so real, a reality so terrible, that he got up, laughing.

"I never heard a less cordial dismissal," he said. "You might as well have said that the last omnibus between Mount Street and Grafton Street starts in two minutes from now. So I shall just catch it."

Harry recovered his manners.

"But don't go," he said. "Surely you know me well enough to know I was only fooling. And surely we are all friends enough for you to let me go to bed when I choose? What's the matter?"

"My dear chap, nothing is the matter, of course. But it is frightfully late. Surely I may go to bed too, and allow Mrs. Whittaker to do the same. But I must shake hands. Stella and I part for ten days. It is very serious."

"Anyhow, I introduced you," said he.

"Yes; and a thousand thanks. I, too, wish all the festivals were lumped together. I am stopping up in town, too, for Easter. Perhaps we shall meet, Harry."

She interrupted.

"Oh, Mr. Grey, don't ask him to dine with you," she said, "or play bridge, or anything. He is going to work fearfully hard. And he is so unpleasant when he is working. Good-night!"

"I'm more than half-inclined to come down to Bracebridge with you, Nellie," said he.

"Well, then, don't, but ring the lift-bell for Mr. Grey. It sticks sometimes—the lift I mean—Mr. Grey, and that is wildly exciting. Good-night."

Harry returned alone to the flat the next evening after seeing Eleanor off. For the past fortnight he had been waging a very uphill battle with himself, and he was still so far victorious up to the moment of her going off alone, that if she had encouraged it, he would have gone with her, instead of remaining behind in a freedom that he well knew was dangerous. At the same time his victory over himself was not so decisive as to allow him to tell her that he felt unsafe alone, nor to hint to her the existence of a second danger, of which at present she suspected nothing. All this fortnight he, with an effort that, though successful, was despairing, had completely kept off drink, and had also sat for hours daily at his desk, waiting for the inspiration which would not visit him. Sometimes he had got up, as she had said, very early, and had written fragments that in themselves were quite passable portions of a play. But the play as a single composition would not form itself in his mind, and no number of little detached scenes brought him any nearer it. He was doing patch-work instead of weaving a fabric. And all the time the evil counsel that Marian had given him, when she told him that creative work could not be produced except

under the inexorable conditions which the creative mind imposed, was gaining ground in his brain, filling it with yeasty fumes. By degrees, too, the knowledge that it was evil subsided; he began growingly to believe that it was sound. This time he had set a limit on what he thought were his powers of endurance, thus planning surrender. As long as Eleanor remained in town he would be able to resist; when she went, he would yield. He did not want to yield, so that even this morning he was half willing to go with her, but he had stopped. She, still pursuing her plan of giving him her entire trust and his own freedom, had no idea of his contemplated surrender.

There was the one danger; the other was not less critical. Here, however, he told himself he had a safeguard, as is the way with weak and defenceless men, for his love for his wife had in no way suffered diminution. It had not paled in the dawning of another passion, and he told himself that it would stand like a drawn sword between himself and Marian. So perhaps it would, but it was necessary for him to grasp that sword. Instead, he had now let himself meet temptation face to face, saying he was strong enough to withstand it. There, again, blazed forth his weakness. For strong men turn tail and run from temptation. But that requires bravery; to face it needs only cowardice.

He dined alone that night, meaning to work long and late, and the two temptations played each into the hands of the other. For the best way of resisting dangerous thoughts was clearly to occupy himself closely, to let his work absorb him, and the only way of doing that was to give it the conditions it needed. He was to see Marian to-morrow, for he was dining with her, and there, again, if only he could bring some solid section of work to read and discuss with her, there would be less danger of looking towards the fields of trespass. How far she suspected that passion had dawned for him he did not know. She had made great friends with Eleanor, it seemed to him, and of late she had treated him with a breezy sort of familiarity that somehow rather piqued him. It also, it may be remarked, represented to Eleanor a very nice comrade-like friendship untouched by anything sentimental. That aspect of it, how it was meant to strike Eleanor, had not occurred to him. For, in spite of the tricks he played on himself, the excuses he so ingeniously discovered and used, concealing his want of belief in them, there was a very great simplicity and guilelessness in his estimate of others. It was

very easy to deceive him; he was apt to put the best construction on the doings of others, and was ready to take them at their word. The success of such a mode is not always conspicuous, but the mode is disarming and lovable.

He worked that night with a brilliance and a certainty that he had never attained yet. His creative power had stored the treasure-house of his brain with its wares; it but needed the opening of it. First one and then another of his tentative scenes was torn up: they were patch-work of mean material, now that the real loom hummed and buzzed, putting out from the darkness of its weaving this splendid fabric. Hour after hour went by, his subconscious mind wholly absorbed and busy, his conscious mind dwindled to a pin-point, intent only on one thing—namely, to prolong this felicitous hour by careful administration of stimulant. He knew fairly well now the degree of exaltation required; a little less and he drifted back into normal activity again; a little more and intoxication got hold of him. Careful steering was needed, else on one side or the other he ran aground. For the past fortnight he had cudgelled his brain, fruitlessly so it appeared; now he harvested a royal reaping.

His fire had long gone out when he put down his pen, and returned to a world that for the last six hours had passed out of existence for him, and he saw with amazement that it was after four o'clock in the morning. But when he came to take stock of those hours, he found ample evidence of them, a pile of papers by his right hand; a mound of cigarette ends at his left; and on the table in front of him a jug of water and a whisky bottle, both nearly empty. Then, too, he remembered for whom his work was written—that peerless woman, so full of moods that varied from haunting tenderness to maddening perversities and unreasonableness. They had all been stored in his brain, and now he had given them all back, setting them in jewels of speech and clash of dramatic incident. Marian owed him something for this. She, when it was read to her, would be the first to acknowledge it. Yet what did he want of her? And his heart flamed and showed him.

He felt hot and excited, and went to the window, drawing back the curtain. It faced eastward, and in the quiet sky above the sleeping town a few low wisps of cloud had caught the blink of the coming day. Fifty feet below the street was pearly dark, and empty of traffic. He must sleep, too, not indulge in fancies. And then suddenly he knew he was

dead drunk. The excitement of production had retarded the effects of his drinking. Now that the excitement was over, it resurged upon him, and he stumbled to bed.

He had given orders that he should not be called until he rang his bell, and woke not until nearly noon. He had slept off the excess of the night, as far as physical liabilities were concerned, and it was with an extraordinary sense of unexpected freedom that he found himself in bed in his dressing-room. Instantly his mind recaptured its consciousness, and it was with nothing but joy that he recollected his harvested work. With joy, too, he realized that a whole week of freedom lay in front of him, and for the first time the thought of Eleanor being away roused no regret. Hitherto, he had always crawled back into a flabby penitence; now it was with a sense of pure relief that he found he had not got to be penitent. He had no wish in the world except to work.

His conscious mind awoke a little more, enough to enable him to press the bell that lay close to his head, and next moment Morris brought him in a cup of tea, and drew up the blinds. Mature sunshine splashed into the room, and he looked at his watch, finding with pleasure how late it was, for that showed how perfectly he had slept. Cold bath and no breakfast was his order, but lunch at one, and all his physical instincts thrilled with the pleasure in front of him. They were simple and sensuous, and filled his horizon. The hot tea was delicious to a mouth slightly parched, and restored its fluidity. And he hurried to the cool coffin of cold water waiting for him with an exquisite foreboding of pleasure. Then he stripped off his night-suit, and with disdain of sponge or soap, plunged bodily in, letting his head go under, and feeling, with a rejuvenated sense, the thrill and healing of the water. Certainly he had drunk too much last night, but this cold ripple entirely restored him. He was himself again, master of his soul. Intoxication was a physical condition, and another physical condition cancelled it. He glowed with the corrective chill. All his brain was in flame again.

Then for the first time he allowed it to look forward. To-night no such feast was spread again, for he was dining out somewhere. . . . Oh, he knew where, and with whom!

Not more than five minutes had elapsed since his first awaking. They had been vivid enough, but now their vividness sank into torpidity. All that work last night was directed towards one thought. Now the thought shone and burned, and once more his mouth was parched and his heart

leaped into his throat and hung there throbbing. And he turned on the water-tap and drank from his hollowed hand.

He found her waiting his arrival that evening in a sort of timid eagerness.

"You have brought yourself, anyhow," she said, shaking hands with him; "and, oh, Boy, I am so pleased to see you! I have been in unutterably low spirits all day, and sick and tired with myself—all alone, too; I haven't set eyes on a soul. I was too depressed to go to see anybody, and I was so horrid that nobody came to see me. And besides yourself, have you brought anything?"

Harry took a very solid sheaf from his pocket.

"I've brought that," he said.

"Oh, you dear! And is it—is it as it should be? When did you do it?"

"From dinner time last night till rather after four this morning," he said.

"Ah, what bliss! Weren't you happy? Let us have dinner at once. I thought we would dine quietly here, if you didn't mind, instead of going out. I am careful of your reputation, you see. Louis Grey might see us, or some other kind friend, and tell Eleanor that as soon as she goes away, you seek consolation for her absence. You do, too, and I am going to give it you, just as you are going to give it me for my terrible fit of blues, by reading over the most lovely bit of play that was ever written. Dear me, what nonsense I talk! As a matter of fact, Louis is coming to dine with us."

She looked up at him quickly, and saw his fallen face, and burst out laughing.

"That was all I wanted to know," she said. "I only wanted to see if you minded, and quite clearly you did. As if I should ask Louis when I had the chance of an evening with you! Do you still mistrust me? Take me into dinner, and you will see there are only places for two, and he isn't one of them."

Harry's equanimity at once returned to him.

"I'm fond of Louis," he said, "and quite delighted he is not here. And how much nicer this is than dining at a restaurant!"

"Eat your soup, and then see if you still think so," said she. "Boy, you have an extraordinary effect on me. In two minutes you have made life seem not only possible, but deliciously pleasant. And I've done all the talking myself,

so it can't be your agreeable conversation. It must be you—the fact of you."

This was very different from the breezy familiarity with which she had treated him lately.

"Something in me answers to you," she said. "And, oh, I have been so depressed. I don't so much mind being depressed on a wet winter day, because there is clearly cause for it, in the wet and the winter, but when it is spring, with the sun and the west wind, it is a terrible waste of time not to be happy. Oh, it maddens me that you can't buy time! I count no minute wasted if one is enjoying it or learning something in it, but to spend a day as I have done, in mere anæmic dejection, is a dreadful thing to have on one's conscience. How on another day I shall long for the hours I have let run away! When one is unhappy, one ought to be able to put the minutes away in a paper bag to bring out when one is happy again. Let us sit up very late to-night, so that I may gain back what I have wasted."

"That suits me," he said. "I shall stop talking over the play with you until you send me away. I want"—he hesitated a moment—"I want to get the whole of it down in some form during this week. I want to get all the creating and the planning done. I'm a bachelor, you see, just for this week. I may sit up till any hour."

She smiled at him.

"Ah, you are a dear!" she said, "to be so keen about my play. I wonder, do you like your work better than anything else? I expect you do. Probably you would be furious if even Eleanor came in and interrupted you when you were at it. Probably, if you felt the mood was on you, you would leave anybody in the world to get at it again. Oh, you people who make things, you are the lords of the world. You sit up among the stars with the cherubim to hold your ink-bottles and paper, and we all stand below to scramble for anything you let drop. Don't you despise the whole crowd of us really?"

Some little psychic magnetic shock passed between them as their eyes met again.

"There is nonsense if you like!" he cried. "Why, half the fun of work, as I see it, is that one is absorbed in some other personality. There is precious little of the cherubim in my play. But you are there. Heaps of you!"

There was an earnestness about him now that was unmistakable, and in her secret heart her jealousy of Eleanor

began to fade into a sort of contemptuous pity. He had spoken no word of love to her yet, but the impulse and the desire were already felt by her through his dumbness. Nor was she cold of blood towards him; whether she had a heart or not, she was capable of feeling attraction, and certainly she felt it now. She leaned a little forward towards him.

"And you really propose to go on thinking of me all this week," she said. "I am so sorry for you. You will get dreadfully bored with me. But if, as you say, that is part of the condition of your work, I regretfully consign you to the boredom of me. For I do want the play so much."

They had finished dinner, and were lingering, as they had lingered before, elbow on table. Intentionally she ignored that which she correctly divined in him, wanting to see whether he would express it more directly. She did not have to wait for it. His face flushed suddenly.

"And that's all you care for us!" he said, "though you call us creators sitting among the stars. We may be poor devils, sitting in the nether pit, for all that you care! All you want is just our work, and as long as you get that, you snap fingers at us. We may be bored, as you suggest, or get tipsy over it, or sweat heart's blood, it's all one to you. 'Three acts please; yes, that's all right,' you say. 'Thank you, very much, and go to hell!'"

She had not meant to arouse quite that. Devilish in its essence, as her project had been, for it sprang from jealousy at Eleanor's marriage, and had been redipped in green again by her success, she had not consciously desired to do more than make things domestically disagreeable for Eleanor, by showing her her husband making a fool of himself with another woman. She had meant Harry to be attracted by her, not hesitating to blind him to the issue by talking of friendship and her own loneliness; she had meant him, even, to fall in love with her mildly, in a comfortable, controllable sort of way. But, though still he had spoken no word of love to her, and had but roundly abused her, she knew that this came from a greater depth, so to speak, than any she had contemplated angling in. She had but gone a-fishing in what she thought were shallow waters, and some denizen of deep places had taken her bait. And his vehement rudeness gave her a thrill of emotion which, for the first time, in her abominable dealings with him, was genuine and human. Laudable it was not, considering the circumstances he was in, but it had about it

that claim to respect which all real and first-hand emotion deserves. Had he been free, she would not have been doing less than her duty to her own soul and his by giving it full play; the circumstances under which she felt it, not its nature, made her stare at him a moment in silence, as he sat there angry and handsome. Though she basked in this outburst, there was more heat in it than she had meant to arouse, and half reluctantly her idea was to calm it.

"But, my dear," she said, "what has your poor friend done to be spoken to like that? I only asked you to try to put up with the boredom of having me perpetually in your thoughts until you had finished the play. Why all this storm of hell and heart's blood?"

Harry made as large an endeavour as his weakness was capable of. In other words he recovered himself for the moment, but told himself that it was but a moment's recovery. He pushed his chair a little back.

"Indeed, I don't know, now you ask me," he said. "When I'm writing, I—I get worked up about things—I see everything violently. It's a great mistake. But one's inventions get mixed up with realities, and—and one falls in love with one's puppets and forgets they are just puppets. Does that mean anything to you? I dare say not. But I can't explain any better. Will that do for an apology?"

She held out her hand to him with her friendliest smile.

"But it's I who must apologize," she said. "Somehow I hurt your feelings, and I am so sorry. Boy, you did give it me hot. It was charming of you, do you know, since you thought, for one dreadfully mistaken moment, that I—well, that I put the play first and you second. What an absurd child!"

She gave him, without credit to her, since she had not intended it, just the chance he was capable of taking. The "absurd child" brought him to the fact that he was not one. He was a man, so he weakly told himself, and as a man he was a responsible being. The name that was meant to coax and caress, only repelled, and brought him in thought nearer to Eleanor again. The balance was weighted almost evenly; the weight of a grain might incline it to one side or the other. A little more, and passion would outweigh the other scale; a little less, and love would toss passion, the unlawful, to the beam. Such were the usual alternatives, but she, coarse of grain and obvious in perception, knew of no third attitude, which, indeed, was more nearly his at this moment than either

of the others. To his hovering mind the two seemed really equal, and he would be liable to turn from one to the other and back again. For to strong natures love is dominant, and to such there is one woman in all the world, or there is none. But to the weaker there may easily be two, and there were two to him. That one of the two called him an "absurd child" was sufficient to place him with the other.

The trouble and ill-temper all cleared from his face, and he took her hand cordially.

"That is just what I am," he said, "and I will try not to be what you so rightly call me. But there's the play, anyhow. I do believe you will like it. You don't take me seriously, but you will have to take seriously what I have written. And you can put me second, or third, or nowhere, if you will only like it. It's you—just you. You told me you couldn't act, and that the only part you were any good for was yourself. I took you at your word."

He still held her hand, and looked from her eyes to it.

"By Jove, what a hand!" he said. "I could crush it into a bag of bones, and yet it's so much stronger than me. I say, I shall talk nonsense again in a minute, and we've got to be very serious. Also, it's after ten already. I must begin reading to you, if we are going to get through any work. You must help me, and suggest, and—and I want to get it all done in some form this week."

"Yes, we will be serious," she said, just pressing his hand before she released her own.

Presently they were installed in her sitting-room, and she was busy in her attentions to him, so that he should be comfortable while he read, and have the light conveniently placed.

"Now we must run no risks of being interrupted," she said, as she completed these arrangements, "so we must see that we have everything. Cigarettes, ah, they have not brought in drinks——"

"Not for me, thanks," said he.

She rang.

"Very well, for me, then. Now, just wait one moment, Boy, and then you shall begin. Oh, I am going to enjoy it."

His last night's work did not disappoint him, now that he read it again. He had told her that he had given her herself to act, and the brilliance of the portraiture fascinated her. She felt every line of her part with the same vividness as she had recognized her failure to feel the beauty of "The

April Morning." As surely as the other was Eleanor, so this was herself, and between them sat the artist, this weak brilliant boy, who by one of Nature's ironies, had this genius of seeing the souls of people, and putting them into wonderful dramatic forms, but only, so it appeared, when alcohol had put him in an abnormal condition of brain power. She had long suspected that. This evening the word he had let slip, when he had said that she did not mind his getting bored or tipsy over creation, had made it certain. What, then, was of good in her, joined hands with Eleanor; pity and the instinct of a woman to save a man from his weakness were not non-existent. If Eleanor and she worked together over this, though Eleanor would never know she had an ally, there was a strong chance of saving him. But, to do that she had to work with Eleanor; she had also to postpone, none knew how long, the completion of the wonderful work that had been begun for her. And she could accept neither of these conditions.

As he read her admiration of him waxed like a brewing gale. Physically he attracted her; she delighted in his friendship; she almost worshipped that warped and brilliant mind.

When he came to the end she rose.

"But it is a wonder, a wonder!" she cried. "Oh, I should like to chain you down to your desk, and let you write it with my heart's blood if you wished. Of course you must finish it this week! You are on fire with it. You have got it planned; you just have to write. Boy, you are absolutely adorable!"

He put down the sheets and came beside her, and she saw his hands were trembling.

"It is you, then, is it?" he said. "But I must know you better before I can finish it."

She met his look, and her lips just moved.

CHAPTER XIV

THE lawn of Mrs. Wilkins' house down at Bracebridge lay to the south of the terrace on which that charming red-brick structure stood, and by tea-time on this blazing day in the end of July, terrace and lawn alike were cooled in the lengthening shadow of it. Tennis was in progress there, and even more remarkable than the inadequacy of the players were the loud and agonized shrieks that every now and then came from Eleanor, as she rushed wildly to the place where the ball had been some few seconds before, and hit the empty air. She had arrived from town only ten minutes before with Louis Grey, and regardless of his protests, or the fact that she had on a very smart London gown, insisted, without waiting for her luggage to be unpacked, that the stage, in the shape of themselves, should play a match against the Church, in the shape of her father and Alice. Alice was not, perhaps, quite strictly Church, but Eleanor had told her that it was her duty and privilege to support it. It wanted a deal of support.

Eleanor was in topmost tearing spirits. She had had three months of very hard work, but that was over, and her holiday had begun. These three months, as far as she was concerned, had been of phenomenal success; she had sprung with one bound into prominence, and there was no doubt, as Louis Grey had told her, that it was she who had made the success of Harry's play. In itself the play had not taken the popular fancy. It was to see her that the theatre had filled for its six nights a week, and its Wednesday and Saturday matinées. Now the London season was over, and in two days she and Harry would leave for a month's holiday in North Italy. Up till quite lately the summer here in England had been wet and chilly, and she longed with the call of her Italian blood, for the heat and brightness of the South. They had taken a house at Paraggi, on the Ligurian coast, for a month, from an English family, whose servants were accustomed to the ways of foreigners; both of them preferred that to an hotel. In September she would have to be back in London again, and

Louis's plan was to run "The April Morning" for another month. After that he was going to give two Shakespeare revivals—"Hamlet" and "The Winter's Tale." Sometimes, when she thought of that, Eleanor envied Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; the maw of the opening earth seemed less terror-fraught than what awaited her. At other times she envied nobody in the wide world.

In material respects, too, the last three months had been eminently satisfactory. She, in addition to her aloe-flowering reputation, was making a very good income, while Harry was almost indecently prosperous, for the play he had written for Marian Anstruther was a great success. But in certain other respects Eleanor had had a good deal of anxiety, some of which, she still told herself, might be entirely fanciful, some of which, unfortunately, was quite real and well-founded. For she had come back after her Easter holiday to find that Harry had been indulging in a heavy bout of drinking, and yet from that swinish week there had sprung, like flowers out of mud, this extraordinary play. He had done nothing to it but a few disjointed scenes, before she had gone into the country, but when she came back, it was finished, and he a nervous wreck. So much, at any rate, was real enough and terrible enough, and in the week that followed his struggles to keep off drink, not always successful, were pitiful to see. But, what was perhaps fanciful on her part, was worse yet. A thousand times she tried to reason herself out of it, but a thousand times the suspicion returned. And yet, perhaps, she was hideously wronging him. Certainly a week ago, when she suggested that they should go abroad together for six weeks, he had welcomed and accepted the scheme with eager enthusiasm. To-night, after dinner, for he had things to do in town which detained him, he would join her here; in two days they set off together. It was this, the definite cessation of any cause for anxiety, that gave her this exuberance of spirits. She would have Harry all to herself, and, with the splendid confidence of love, she believed she could restore him to himself.

Eleanor had hung her view-eclipsing hat, which Harry called "The Seven Days of Creation," since it contained specimens of most natural objects, on the support of the tennis-net. She was the despair of her maid, because, though she loved delicious clothes, her love was untinged with any respect, and she treated them abominably. A wild volley from her partner at this moment lifted it off the post and sent two innocent rosebuds into the air.

"Oh, Mr. Grey, my only hat!" she shrieked. "What a butcher you are! And that dreadful volley of yours lost us the game and the set as well, and perhaps I had better change my dress before I have another one. Daddy, darling, the Church *was* militant, wasn't it? And I want to come and dine with you to-morrow night, if Mrs. Wilkins will let me. Come for a little stroll with me until tea is ready. I don't think you've heard any of my plans yet—and they are such nice ones."

Eleanor soothed the outraged hat as well as she was able, and took her father's arm.

"I couldn't come to stay with you, dear," she said, "because Mrs. Wilkins had asked us ages ago, and so it must wait till Harry and I come back from abroad. That's the first thing I had to tell you: secondly, we are going abroad on next Wednesday as ever is. To Paraggi, too. Wasn't that where you went before you met my mother?"

"It was there I met her, Nellie," he said. "It is odd you should be going there."

"But that wasn't where you used to tread the vintage with the other Italian boys?" she asked. "No, I remember, that was in the South. Oh, daddy, I wonder if any of mother's people are about there still. Perilli was her name, wasn't it? I must ask. Do you remember we once planned to go there together? You couldn't come, could you? You see, it was all settled in a hurry."

"My dear, indeed I couldn't."

He paused a moment, considering with himself.

"Nellie, dear," he said at length. "I never told you much about your mother. I have often meant to; but, somehow, I have not. There were things that made it rather hard for me to talk of her to you. But, since it is very likely you may see relations of hers there, I had better tell you something. You will find them very humble people."

"Yes, dear; I understood that," said she.

Again he paused.

"Well, then, my dear," he said, "I don't think you need ask me to tell you anything more. I dare say there are some of them there still. One of them, your uncle, that is, used to be a boatman at Porto-fino. One had a shop at Santa Margherita."

They had strolled to a high place in the garden, from which they looked down on the river-valley below. The Vicarage and its garden was spread out maplike beneath; the church

brooded over it. Eleanor unloosed her arm from her father's and pointed there.

"Daddy, look!" she said. "There is everything that was home to me, until I met Harry. There is the orchard where we sat and talked one Saturday afternoon, after I had disgraced myself in church by playing 'La Donna e Mobile,' as loud as possible. There is the steep path opposite, down which you and I have come on so many Eves of Christmas. It is all so knit into my heart. I shouldn't be myself without it. But there are so many dropped stitches in my heart. You could put them in. For certain reasons I want the patience and the indulgence of love most tremendously just now."

She turned and faced him.

"You can't guess, dear," she said, "and I can't tell you. But I want for my own reasons to be armed with the kindness of love. You can't love, I think, and yet be harsh. You should never be harsh, whatever happens. I want——"

She came a little closer to him, grasping his arm in her long-fingered hands.

"I want to be so much bigger than I am," she said. "Don't try to understand, because you can't. I am small and critical about most people. But I am not about you, and I am not about my mother's memory. I would accept anything about either of these, and I would try to make my power of understanding others equal to the understanding I know I should have there. Do you see at all?"

She paused.

"I want to know all there is," she said. "I am grown up, I have a certain right. I always felt there was something you didn't tell me. Those are the dropped stitches. If there is nothing, tell me so. If there is something, tell me also. I am not a child, but I am your child."

He held her as she had placed herself.

"I will tell you," he said. "I fell in love with your mother very suddenly, and she with me. We were married afterwards, Eleanor. You were born afterwards. We were both very young. She was not as old as you are now. I was not older than Harry is. She used to help her mother in the kitchen and about the house that I had taken there one summer."

Eleanor's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears; her mouth trembled and smiled.

"Oh, you darlings!" she exclaimed.

Then she laughed.

"Oh, daddy!" she said. "I knew nothing could hurt

which concerned you and her. Ought I to have been shocked? I suppose so. But I can't help it. Oh, was there ever such a lovely conversation! That is just what I wanted—something like that, to teach me."

She shook her head at him.

"What a naughty boy!" she said. "But perhaps it was that which has made you so wise to understand. I know I should come to you if I wanted someone to understand me. Oh, don't be frightened! I am not going to do anything puzzling. Bless you, dear."

"But it was very wrong, Nellie," he said. "You mustn't lose sight of that."

"I don't lose sight of it . . . I know it. But it is no use going on looking at that always."

"Yes, you are quite right there, Nellie," he said. "And there is a great difference between being penitent and doing nothing except thinking about your sin for the rest of your life."

"Yes, that would be dull," said Eleanor with conviction.

A heavy duty of forgiveness devolved upon Eleanor later in the evening, for when she went up to dress, she found her maid mourning over the ruins of her hat, which now appeared to be the only one, in a sense she had not contemplated. Temporary mental aberration alone could be alleged, and the literal fact was she had not got another that could be considered respectable for a large garden-party that Mrs. Wilkins was giving in her honour the next day. But the situation was not irremediable, for her motor in which she had driven down that afternoon was here, and she could easily send her feather-headed incompetent to go and get a hat or two. Then another idea struck her. Harry was not leaving town till half-past ten that night; why should not the car go up after dinner, do its errand at the flat, and bring him down. A further development followed. It was a delicious night; why should not she herself go up, thus insuring against risks of more aberrations, and return with him? The box-seat of the car would be taken up with luggage, and it really was too much to expect Harry to drive down with a stony and offended maid. But she herself would tremendously enjoy the drive with him; driving on a hot night was delicious. They often went for a turn after the theatre. It would, too, save him travelling in one of the least animated trains on the most dilatory line in England.

She gave orders to this effect, rubbing in, not wholly

ingenuously, the fact that she had to spend all her time in going backwards and forwards to London, because hats were forgotten by other people, and, refusing all escort, set out soon after dinner on her drive. She had intended to send a telegram to Harry, saying that she was coming up, and would take him down with her, but she found the office already closed, and thus would make an unexpected appearance in Mount Street. But she had set off in plenty of time to catch him there before he need start for his train.

The coolness, and dusk, and solitude of her drive were all to her mind, for they suppressed surface perception, and sent her thoughts inwards. She wanted so much more patience in her dealings with Harry. Patience had to be infinite to be patience at all, and it was only through love that that could be attained. Once, about a month ago, she had come home after the theatre, and found him hopelessly fuddled, and had lost temper, patience, all the qualities that she needed, and had told him she did not wish to see him again till he was sober. She had frightened him; she saw that, but at the moment she was too sore and disappointed to care, and he, taking her at her word, had stumbled out of the flat, and gone downstairs. Then all her temper and impatience had oozed out of her, and she had sat there, trembling and sick at heart till he should come back. What if some accident happened to him, if he never came back? She had telephoned to his club, to Louis Grey, to half a dozen houses he might conceivably have gone to, but in vain, and she had sat alone with her fears and bitter self-reproach for a couple of hours or more. Whatever Harry did, she must always be ready for him, never angry, for anger could never successfully accomplish what love was too impatient to attempt. *It was just when he failed, above all, that she must not fail him.* To whom was he to come but to her? And she had dismissed him with contempt and anger. Shame burned her to recall it.

An ominous explosion and the stoppage of the car roused her to external impressions again. As ill-luck willed it, they carried no extra wheel, and a quarter of an hour must be spent in tedious repair. She found, too, that it was later than she had expected; there was but a small chance that she would catch Harry at the flat. They were, however, already close to London, the lights of which turned the blue velvet of the midsummer sky to dusky red, and it was worth while going on, if only for the hat. If the journey had not been so nearly done, she would have abandoned it, for the drive back with

Harry was the larger motive in going. But there was still a possibility of catching him, if the streets were not badly congested with westward-going traffic. But before long she saw that her timely arrival was no longer possible, and it was already half-past ten when they turned into Mount Street. He would have left a quarter of an hour before.

She let herself into her flat with her latch-key, and found the hall was lit. That was so characteristic of Harry; he never remembered to turn lights out when he left a room, and he, with equal conviction, told her that this was her failing, not his. The hats she wanted were in her bedroom, the door of which was open, and she went straight there, turning up the light just inside. On the bed was lying an opera cloak, topaz-colour or pink, trimmed with feathers. It was not hers.

Eleanor stood quite still for a moment, feeling curiously detached and unsensitive, as if this was not happening to her, but that she was a mere spectator at some scene that existed only in some other imagination. Then she came out, crossed the hall again, and went straight into Harry's room. The two were sitting side by side on the sofa; her hand lay in his, and her head was thrown back, laughing at something he had just said. And everything slid back into the aspect of reality again. These things were happening here, and now, and to them, three of them. But Eleanor did not feel she was interrupting, as had happened twice before when she found them together. It was Marian who interrupted; she herself had a right here.

There was dead silence for a moment; then she heard her own voice speaking quite quietly and sensibly to Harry. She did not purposely ignore Marian; she had merely no impulse to speak to or recognize her.

"My maid had forgotten some things I wanted," she said. "I drove up to get them, hoping to get here before you left, so that we should drive back together."

"But what a nice surprise," said Marian. "The Boy and I dined here together."

Still Eleanor entirely disregarded her, but without purpose or effort.

"The car is outside, Harry," she said. "I shall not take five minutes about getting what I want."

Then it was with an effort that she turned to Marian, and spoke quite civilly.

"You left your cloak in my room," she said. "Harry, give her her cloak. Fetch it from my bedroom."

She turned round, facing the fireplace, and the large photograph of herself that hung over it, while without another word the two left the room. In a minute she heard the door close again, and knew that Harry had come back alone. As far as she knew, she had for the moment only one overmastering desire—namely, that he should tell her the truth. She yearned for that, though she knew what the truth must be. Then, still facing the wall, she heard his voice, speaking eagerly and yet shyly.

"I missed the train, Nellie," he said. "I telegraphed to you. Did you not get it? It was the last train; at least, Marian told me so."

Her heart became like lead. It ached too leadenly. There was an A.B.C. guide lying open on the table, but it seemed scarcely worth while to look at it. But she did so, still without speaking, and having found what she knew she would find, she put it down again.

"Or is there another?" he asked.

"Harry, you said you missed your train," she said. "Did you attempt to catch it? Did you go to the station?"

He had taken up the railway guide, but he let it drop again without looking at it.

"No," he said. "We suddenly found it was too late. And then, as I tell you, she said there was no other, and so——"

And then suddenly, as he looked at his wife, something broke within him. He had been telling himself that he was bound to lie to save Marian. But he could not do it.

"I can't go on telling you lies," he said. "I didn't mean to catch any train."

Eleanor covered her face with her hands for a minute. "Oh, thank God!" she said.

On the table was a tray with syphons and spirits. From habit merely he poured himself out some whisky.

"No, dear, please don't do that," said she, and he pushed the glass away from him.

"I think we had better talk here, Harry," she said. "We can't shout what we have got to say. Indeed, we must finish our talk before we know whether you are coming back with me. Now, you are in love with her?"

His eyes fell for a moment before hers; then he looked at her again.

"Yes," he said.

She could say little of the next question.

"And?" she asked.

"Yes," he said again.

The strain of this questioning was beginning to tell on her. She bit her lip furiously to check the trembling of her mouth.

"Since Easter or thereabouts?" she asked.

"Since then."

For one moment—a moment in which but a parody of her best self appeared—Eleanor was filled with a contemptuous anger for him, since he had done exactly what she longed for him to do, and told her the truth. A real man would have lied and tried to screen the woman he loved. It should have made no difference to him whether she herself believed him or not; he was bound, if he loved Marian, to swear that he did not, that their friendship was a thing for the sunlight. He had chosen between his wife and his mistress; he would have been more manly if he had taken the burden of his choice, which to her was lies. So strong was this for the moment, that she let her tongue use it.

"And you can't even shield her!" she said.

She knew its unworthiness the moment she had spoken and materialized it. She despaired at herself and her miserable smallness of nature. He had given her truth, and she—she who loved him, and had prayed for truth, flung it back at him, taunting him with not having lied.

"I don't mean that," she said.

Then the horrible inconsequence of human nature reasserted itself, and she saw that a picture on the wall behind him was not straight. It seemed to matter, and she moved round the table to where he was standing, to rectify it. Things ought not to be crooked: some phrase of the sort sang in her brain. In silence she put it straight, and turning, she was close to him. His face despaired; he was gross and weak.... And yet he was Harry, the man she had loved. And there was something of the original about him still, in this whipped caricature. Rather dully she wondered what it was that still reminded her of him.

"There is just one thing," he said, "which I don't believe you understand at all. It is just this: I could have lied to you, as you thought I should, and as the world would think, if I didn't love you; but I love you. I don't care what I've done. I love you."

One step of her's brought them quite together.

"Oh, Harry," she said.

"It is true."

For a moment more she stood without touching him. Then suddenly she took him to her.

"I never thought of that," she said.

"I knew you hadn't. I have thought of it all the time. But I'm weak and hopeless, and . . . you ought to know what I am."

She noticed there that was no response on his part to her gathering of him. He stood there limp as a stranger, and yet she could feel he trembled at her touch; then he thrust her from him, then took her head in his hands and kissed her on the mouth, quickly, imperatively, but like a thing ashamed.

"I suppose that is another insult to you," he said; "but it is me, all the same. We took each other for better or worse, and I have made it damnably the worse; but there is just so much of the better left in me, that I *do* love you."

She did not quite let him go, but kept her hands laid on his shoulders.

"I want to understand," she said. "If I had not come up to-night, you would have been with her, and to-morrow you would have come down to me. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it," he said.

She slid her hands down his arms, and let go of him, and within her there went on a struggle so fierce that it seemed as if her soul must have been heard crying aloud. Her soul longed for him, but if he wished it, she must set him free; for the one thing stronger than her longing for him was the impossibility of keeping him, if he wanted to go, and the further uncontemplated impossibility of having just a share in him.

"I see," she said. "So the choice is up to you. I will do what you prefer. You may go back to her now, this minute, if you wish; I will set you free as soon as that can be done. If you do not wish that, we will go back together; but either she is to go out of your life now, or I. I am sorry if you feel I am forcing you, but there can be no delay about this. You may take either course you will."

He came a step nearer her.

"I have chosen," he said, "and you know how. I am afraid you do not think much of my resolves and promises, but I will try not to be such a wretched fellow, if you take me back. But there is one thing I must tell you first."

"If it concerns the past, I don't want to hear it," said she.

"I think it is better you should," he said, "though it

would be easier for me not to tell you. It makes me viler than you know; but I must tell you."

"Tell me, then," she said, setting her teeth.

"It is this—I didn't believe it, but I let myself make excuses out of it. She told me that Louis was in love with you—that you were great friends——"

Eleanor had gone perfectly white.

"Do you want me to answer that? she said."

He raised his eyes to her again, and the foul poison which he had allowed to lie in his mind withered and vanished.

"No," he said.

There was silence a moment.

"That is over, then," said Eleanor.

Vehemence and anger are known to be very fatiguing, but the restraint of them, the struggle not to let them exist in the mind, is one that is infinitely more taxing to the nervous strength, and as she said, "That is over, then," Eleanor sat down, with collapse almost, on the sofa. She did not want to cry, or to reproach, or even to give welcome to the man who had returned to her; she was too tired to be conscious of anything else than her overwhelmng weariness. Ever since that ghastly moment when she had found the feather-trimmed cloak lying on her bed, she had utterly repressed all expression of the emotions that raged within her, letting them spend their force on herself, instead of giving them outlet and herself relief. But after a minute or two she roused herself to find the things for which originally she had come, and they went downstairs to the car that was waiting for them. Harry, also, had scarcely spoken a word since Eleanor had said it was over, but here he made one of those delicate little points which were so characteristic of him, and almost womanly in their perception.

"Would you prefer that I go outside, Nellie?" he asked.

She smiled at him, appreciating it, and yet wondering at an attention so infinitesimal. Certainly it showed he was thinking of her, but in how superficial a manner! It was as if you wiped some specks of dust from the face of one to whom you had dealt a wound that might have been mortal.

"No, dear, come in," she said. "But I think we won't talk more just now, Harry. I am so tired."

For a long way they drove in silence through the alternate glare and darkness of the gaslit streets, crowded with the joyous traffic from the emptied music-halls and places of

entertainment. To Eleanor it seemed there was no more to be said. Each knew the situation, and, unless she assailed him with reproaches which she neither desired, nor, indeed, was able to utter, she had nothing to add or explain. Then, looking round at him for the first time, as they passed the strong lights of a standing car, she saw he was crying. And her love and tenderness went out to him in all its strength.

She laid her hand on his.

"Harry, dear, be comforted," she said. "Thank God, it is never too late. It will not be easy for either of us at first, but we won't look back—no, not once, but start quite fresh again. There is nothing irremediable, unless we no longer want it to be remedied. Don't cry, my dear. And you will have to be patient with me, if I find it hard, too. It is hardest for you, I know that. Give me a kiss."

At that divine sincerity and forgiveness he broke down.

"But it is impossible you should forgive me," he sobbed. "I don't see the good of your trying. You had better give me up, not let me spoil your life any more. I'm a drunkard, I'm unfaithful to you. I have lied to you——"

She let him cry for a little, his face buried on her shoulder. Hateful though his suffering was to her, it was necessary; she would not have chosen that he should not feel his shame.

"And if I can't help forgiving you?" she said at length.

Yet she felt, though she tried to encourage herself, that he was crying chiefly from weakness, from shame perhaps, from upset and misery, not because he had done wrong and was sorry. He was unhappy, she was afraid, because of the wretched consequences of his sin, the exposure of himself, the suffering it had caused her, which, in her view, mattered so immensely less than the fact that what he had done was wrong. There were lessons indeed, in plenty that could be learned from suffering; it taught that the breaking of moral laws was followed by unpleasant consequences; just as from physical pain it could be learned that the breaking of the laws of bodily health resulted in bodily illness. But she wanted him to see things from a higher standpoint than that; otherwise his present suffering would grow less, of course, in a little time, and would have made him in no way more high-principled, more armed against evil.

Yet she did not wish to be heavy about it. She did not want either to preach to him, or sermonize in her own mind, for she was the same woman who, but a few hours ago, had so

tender and unjudicial an attitude when her father had told her of her mother and himself. That had been wrong, too, and when things were wrong, it seemed to her that there were no little differentiations to be made between one and another. In themselves they must be condemned, but in the very act of condemning them the sinner ought to find something bracing and stirring. That in practical ways her father had given evidence of in his marriage with the girl, and somehow Eleanor felt that by process of soul-alchemy his sin—and again she thought to herself, "the darlings!"—had been transformed and woven into the wise tenderness of character that was his. It was that alchemy she coveted the secret of for Harry. Unhappiness and consciousness of failure were just so much waste, unless from them there sprang a little grit, a little of the common straight-backed uprightness which is the foundation and establishment of character. But, assuredly, if she was able to help him in that regard, it would be neither by preachments nor reproaches. She could only make mire and clay about her shuffling footsteps by such means; his feet had to be set on the road before he could begin to move. And if his sorrow and misery (which for the moment she believed were real enough) were but to plunge him in a sticky sort of hopelessness about himself, she would sooner that he had not been sorry at all. For a regret that gives birth only to pessimism and feeble despair about oneself, was a thing for which there is no use in this world, or, as far as she could tell, in the next. Regret, in order to be fruitful, had to be optimistic in its offspring. It was right and proper for him to label himself a miserable sinner only if the very act of labelling encouraged him to determine that the label should become a libel. Breezy optimism on her part, if it was necessary to touch the subject again, had to be her spirit; breezy oblivion must be the motto for her general ordering of herself, if it was not. So much for herself, in so far as she could help him.

There was a second person concerned besides Harry, and that was Marian. But Eleanor was no missionary, and, frankly, the thought of Marian brought into her mind just one desire—to slap Marian in the face, and that would have given her the profoundest satisfaction. Womanlike as well as womanly, she told herself, with perfect justice in this case, that the whole wretched affair was Marian's fault. She was incomparably the stronger of the two, and she had used her strength to those ends, stuffing packets of it in through the

letter-box, so to speak, in the cover and direction of friendship. Eleanor's innate Christianity drew the line at Marian. No doubt she ought to have desired to help her and make her better; but she desired nothing of the kind.

There was a third person concerned—herself, and here she had the hardest task of all. Her love had been mingled with disgust, and she had to keep the disgust to herself, and show Harry only the love. To shun Harry, not to give him the unspoken, unmistakable welcome of love would be to fail, on her part, to fulfil the contract she had undertaken. She did not receive him back in order to hold him at arm's length and improve his morals. She received him back because she was his wife.

It was not the affair of a moment to arrive at these very simple conclusions, or, more accurately, to let these conclusions arrive and take up their place within her. She could see them, so to speak, in the distance at first, and knew their reality, but they, so it seemed, had to travel until they really reached her. It was easy, for instance, to say, "I must give Harry all welcome," and at once she knew the truth of it. But the truth of it had to be so bound in her that it was instinctive, even as her welcome of him before this had been instinctive. For in the matter of love she had no false dies; no counterfeit could come from her mint.

In the first days that followed, she was almost grateful for a certain nameless timidity on Harry's part, since it enabled her to get on terms with herself, and yet she missed the hopeful outlook she longed to see him present. To sink in your own estimation seemed to her a very salutary thing; to remain sunk suggested the less encouraging simile of drowning. But she welcomed the prospect of this complete change of climate and life that awaited their journey's end; for, materialistic though the view might seem, there was nothing that took people so much out of themselves as a change such as this. To cross the sea, to travel through a foreign land where unfamiliar food was eaten at unaccustomed hours, and you no longer said "Yes" and "No" when you meant them, all encouraged the idea of starting physically anew. The physical change would help the more intricate one. She needed the change, too. She wanted to get rid of the thought of Mount Street, of her bedroom where she had found the alien cloak, of Harry's room where the dry, quiet, scorching things had been said, and to take away from it only that which was essential to life, him and herself. It was as if they had to

put off dirty clothes, and be habited freshly. In their absence the laundress of association would be at work with the discarded garments; when they returned they would find them with the fragrance of freshness on them again. But, so it seemed to her, they must make the change together. She had rejected the more obvious expedient of their both taking separate ways for a time until they had refocussed themselves. For their adjustment concerned them both. It was not as cordial strangers that they were to start a fresh life, but as lovers again. It was no use thinking separately, and after a little lapse of time comparing notes. The contented, ecstatic solitude *à deux* was what must be recaptured, and the pursuit of it, in her view, must be put in hand without delay. If he wanted her, and since she wanted him, she wanted him most in the time that was difficult to him.

They arrived at Santa Margherita after it was dark, and a drive of a couple of miles lay between them and Paraggi. On one side the sea bordered the road; so still was it that only whispers, scarcely audible, were sibilant on its bright lips, and a shower of reflected stars dwelt, unwavering on its bosom. On the landward side the hill climbed steeply, set in series of dim terraces, thickly sown with trees, but here a multitude of other stars hovered and flickered with less tranquillity, for it was alight with myriad fireflies, a spangled curtain of points of flame, and the cicala of the South ground out the harsh monotone that is unlovely to northern ears. But, though Eleanor was a stranger as yet to their grating chirrup, there seemed to her to be something lovely and familiar in the note, even as the new wonder of the fireflies seemed homelike to her. Something in her blood beat to it all, and the dusty dusky ribbon of road that lay in front of them seemed innately natural; so, too, did the belled horses with pheasant-tail feathers cockaded between their ears. At the edge of the whispering sea were occasional fisher-boys, carrying flares of oiled tow, spearing occasional prey; farther out black blots of boats, lantern in prow, were busy with off-shore netting, and down a steep cobbled path to the right a wayfarer came stumbling in the dark, singing with open throat. She felt she had left one home but to find another. It seemed natural that the driver should sit sideways on his box, and make pleasant and usually unintelligible remarks to them. . . .

Then came a sharp angle in the road, and a gateway frowned on their left, while a promontory swam seawards.

"Eccolo! Il Castello," he said, and she felt as if she had known it all the time.

She slept the sleep that follows the night journey, and woke to a brilliance of day that she had never seen yet, and yet knew. Her window, with a little marble balustraded balcony, commanded sea-view on three sides, for to the left was the bay of Santa Margherita, to the right the bay of Paraggi, and in front the ineffable sea itself, without bounds, framed only by the southern-trending coast land, and on the other side by the final promontory of Porto-fino. A little sea-breeze moved in the few pines that stood in front; the sea was too languid to answer it, but the trees were its deputy. They stood root-entwined among brown rocks; below them the promontory rapidly narrowed to a point, round which slept the unfathomable blue. And yet it was not so much the beauty of the morning and the environment that filled her, as the naturalness of it. She had not imagined it like this, because the imagination deals always with things unreal. Simply, it was like this, and she had always known it. And she gave it the frolic welcome of a child coming home. And then, like sudden shadow, the thought of the immediate past clouded her, and, even as it clouded her, it broke into sunlight again. For Harry was here; she had just left him grunting with suppressed sleep.

The sea-scented, pine-scented air made an inimitable fragrance, and she filled mouth and lungs with it. She had to be as big and as fresh as this, and as unthinking, and as unconsciously fragrant. That was the medicine he needed, and she was not less in need of it than he. She wanted an out-of-door cure for her soul, just as she wanted, after these months of theatres and London, an out-of-door régime for her body. Surely the solution lay here, in wind, and sun, and sea. Indelibly optimistic, she attributed to him the symptoms of her own imagined failings, and prescribed for them the cure of which she felt she stood in need. Her mistake was a common one. She felt she needed that with which she was already in complete sympathy, and her sympathy with it presented it for him as a cure as simple and sovereign as it would have been to her if she had needed it. But she had already that optimism and rebound that she longed for him to find. For in the processes of healing it is not only the prescribed remedy that works, it is the will to be healed that sets it working, and for the most part those

who bring nothing of themselves to aid the cure find it unavailing.

But in the first days of their life here she was wonderfully content at the success of this somewhat daring experiment of isolating herself and him. For herself she entered into this simple southern existence of hills and sea as into an inheritance, and her mere zest of living seemed to carry him along with her. On the sides of her sea-girt habitation. the profound shield of illimitable azure came up to the edge of the rocks, and they spent all morning at the bathing, no affair of a short and determined entry into chilly waters, succeeded by a huddling on of clothes to restore impoverished circulation, but long spells of swimming out into the warm blue crystal, with intervals of lizard-like basking on the platform of their bathing-tent. After lunch came siesta, and, when the fierceness of the midday heat began to abate, they would go sailing, or climb up sequestered hillsides, beneath the flickering network shade of the olives, into the heart of the hills, returning not till dusk had gathered, and the fireflies had begun to weave their dances along the hillsides. And yet they were neither of them completely at ease with the other, though the daylong absorption of occupation cloaked the underlying embarrassment. And when dinner was over they played puzzles or patience till bedtime with a greater apparent earnestness and zest than either of them really gave. This covert embarrassment was felt less at first, for the novelty of these occupations sufficed to justify their devotion to them, but after a week or so had passed, it began to put itself more strongly in evidence. Since they had determined to make no further allusion to the fact, they found that there were a myriad topics which had to be carefully handled, as they bordered on the unspoken. Change of subject was a conversational manœuvre that did not suffer from lack of practice. At last, during the second week of their stay, there came a morning when this unreal intimacy broke down. But the breaking down of it was preceded by pathetic efforts to keep it up.

Eleanor had just landed after her first swim, and came up to the platform where he was sitting in his bathing-dress, all glistening from the sea.

"Oh, you men are lucky," she said, "to have tooth-brush hair. Harry, dear, would you mind if I cut mine quite short, so that I could let it get soaked when I bathed, instead of covering it up with waterproof ?"

He laughed.

"You would look a perfectly fascinating boy, Nellie," he said. "Why not do it? And tell Louis that he must put on 'As You Like It,' instead of 'The Winter's Tale.' It would be most realistically appropriate for Rosalind."

"I think Louis would have a fit if I came down to the theatre with short hair," she said. "He would certainly try to cancel his contract with me——"

Perhaps it was best not to pursue that further. There was a little embarrassment in talking to Harry about Louis. So a conversational inclined plane was necessary.

"Harry, we shall be so rich this next winter," she said, "and, whether it is vulgar or not, I think it is immense fun to be rich. There's my salary, and then there are your royalties —I suppose you will run to Christmas at least, won't you?"

This was slightly worse. Eleanor shifted on to the inclined plane again.

"It is so unfair," she said. "You write your play, and then all your bother is over, and you simply sit like Danaë in the shower of gold. It takes you a month, shall we say, or perhaps longer if it doesn't go well——"

And here was further need of the inclined plane. This would not do at all; and Eleanor determined to end it.

"Darling, we are not getting on," she said quickly. "You try to avoid subjects that might distress me; I try to avoid those that might distress you. The consequence is, we have to go delicately like Agag. So they hewed him in pieces before the Lord for being so silly. Let us change all that; let us say whatever comes into our heads as we used to do, and if I find I've put my foot in your It, so to speak, I shall just laugh, and say 'That was a good one.' We change the subject when we speak of Louis Grey, or when we speak of your play for Marian, or when we speak of your other plays, because of the way—well, the way in which you used to write them. And that's why we aren't starting fresh as we ought to be doing. We nip off all the little shoots as soon as they appear. We are being a little heavy, darling, you particularly. I'm not much better myself, but I am rather better."

He had slipped one shoulder out of his bathing-dress. When he moved his arm there was a line sharp as paint, showing neck above, and bare arm below, tanned incredibly with this ten days of laziest exposure. But between the two the skin was of normal whiteness. She just laid a finger-tip where so often her head had been pillowed.

"What a white skin!" she said; "and, somehow, Harry, I like the tan better. It looks open air, and sunny, and careless of itself, and—and so attractive. You've been coddling your mind all these days, or I have been coddling it, and it ought to come out into the air. We're wrapping it up, and saying that it must take care of itself. Well, can't we make it take care of itself in another sense?"

He nodded at her, comprehending.

"I had better tell you, then," he said. "I have heard from her more than once. Twice, I think. My God, I can't be honest, even now. It isn't twice; it's three times. I thought you must have seen the letters arrive. Certainly twice they brought the whole post to you, and you sorted it, and gave me my share. Didn't you guess that, anyhow?"

Eleanor's queer crooked smile, that was so kind and so guileless, leaped to its place.

"Oh, I think one never guesses whom other people's letters are from," she said. "Your eye may tell you, but you have got to tell your eye that it knows nothing about it. No, dear, of course, I never thought about that. But if you say, 'Wasn't I sure you had heard from her?' why, of course I was. She must have written. A woman would write. But what she says can only concern me, if you choose to tell me about it."

She gave a little sigh, wistful in spite of herself.

"Harry, dear, do understand this," she said, "because it has to be the basis of understanding. I don't want to know anything she has said or says to you, until you want to tell it me. Then—then my mouth waters for it. But until then, I assure you, it does not concern me two straws."

He drew up his feet, and sat with arms clasped round his bare knees. Down his calves there was but soft downy hair, adolescent, young, and thin; soft smoothness of body seemed to fit the immaturity of his frail, brilliant mind. She had never realized before how young he was, how defenceless.

"But I want to tell you," he said. "It's poisoning me!"

Her smile was not so certain now. It wavered and tried to be brave.

"I want to hear, then," she said.

"She has written twice—damn it all, I try to tell you, and I keep smoothing it over—she has written three times. She knows I am out here with you——"

"How did she know that?" asked Eleanor quickly.

"She may have seen it in some silly paper——"

He laughed, not quite naturally.

"It's one of the penalties of being a success," he said. "Not me, I mean, but you. I saw myself in some English paper, a week ago, the announcement that Miss Ramsden had gone to Paraggi for a holiday——"

The queer smile faded. Eleanor sat quite still, waiting.

"She might have seen that," said Harry.

There was silence. A little shoal of silver-sided fish leaped from the water just below them and disappeared again. Probably something larger and hungry was in pursuit. There were tragedies going on in this noonday of tranquil waters. There was tragedy going on above them.

"She knew it because I wrote and told her so," said he, in a voice that was impersonal and detached. "I suppose I am about the limit," he added.

Though the sun was so hot, Eleanor gave a little shiver. It was quite instinctive. She had not meant to do anything of the kind, and as soon as she knew she had shivered, she was ashamed.

"Oh, my dear, how you waste time!" she said impatiently and without shame. "Harry, why in the devil's name, which is exactly what I mean, didn't you tell me before? I knew there was something wrong, but how could I have guessed you did anything so disgusting as that? My dear, you have told me now, and that is all that matters. Now, what has she been saying to you in the three letters?"

"Read them if you like," he said. "They are in my coat."

"Yes, bring them," said Eleanor.

He got up and walked across to where he had deposited his clothes. They were there, a little frayed-edged as regards the envelopes from porterage. He put them into her hand.

"You have asked for them," he said.

And then Eleanor lost her temper.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried. "Do you really suppose I want to know what she says? As if I couldn't guess! And you carry them in your coat!"

She tore them across and across, and flung the fragments into the sea.

"You are enough to make a saint despair," she said, all the disappointment of those days welling bitterly up in her mind. "You make a pig of yourself to begin with, my darling, and I really behave like an angel over it. Then you must needs write to her the moment after I have forgiven you—oh, with so full a heart, Harry!—to tell her that I have carried you off. Oh, don't contradict me! You did say that, though

you thought you said that I had allowed you to come back to me. As if I wanted to see her letters! I know what she says. She says I am fighting her. So I am. She says I take you out of reach of temptation! She says—I should think that was in the third letter—that I am welcome to her leavings! That is exactly a harlot's point of view. And to crown all, she probably says that she is sure you are bored here. That is quite horribly true. I think you are. But if there is one ounce of fight left in me, and there are pounds of it, I assure you, you are going to stop here till I choose—till I choose—to come back to England. If you are to become a decent man, it will be because I have made you one. Perhaps you will always be a weak kind of jelly-fish, a thing that floats, like that one there, and just stings as it goes by, without meaning—oh, without meaning! Harry, if I was as weak as you, and I thank God I am not, I should send you home to-morrow with my blessing for you, and a small bracelet, with—little spinel rubies, or something of that sort, for her!"

Eleanor had not finished. Something of the wild restive, Italian peasant blood had been awakened. She was *contadina*, too. She could scold and rate with the best of them. She knew all the time that there was another and perhaps a wiser being within her, but it could not come into action until this reasonable and enraged virago had said her say.

"I think you have understood nothing, Harry," she said. "You think I took you back merely because I was fond of you, and liked to have your arms round me. If that was all, shouldn't I have disowned you? Goodness, it would have been easy enough! You were on fire for her; on that evening when I found you together, you would have welcomed it. Don't contradict; you would have. If I hadn't been wise and quiet, as I was, I should have been here alone, as you very well know, or perhaps, as you kindly suggested, Louis would have been here with me. Certainly, if I had only cared for you like that he would have been, for, barring the fact of yourself—and much comfort I have from that—I would marry him to-morrow. Do you suppose I don't know that he is in love with me? Of course he is, you silly creature! It was only when you said to me that your mistress had suggested to you vile things about me that I was cut to the heart. You can't apparently conceive anybody not being vile. You should try to grasp the fact that there are some people in the world to whom honour, and chastity, and faithfulness, and

purity mean something. To some people a promise to do the best that is in them means something. To others, it appears, it means nothing. It is to help you to keep your promise that I brought you here. I am sorry if you are bored, and if you find me boring, but you have got to make the best of it. It isn't for myself that I keep you."

Harry had stood just where he was when he handed her the letters that now bobbed up and down in fragments on the ripples below the rocks. He had never seen her angry before, and, though what she said made him feel both hurt and ashamed, the fact that she said it like that gave her a new and splendid attraction. The strength of nature which she revealed had been unknown to him before; he had thought that people who were as good and sweet as she must necessarily have the defects of their qualities in a certain lack of human fire. But she was as human as anybody could wish in her anger, and it excited and vivified his weakness.

"But you are glorious!" he said.

She still raged.

"I am not glorious at all," she said. "But I happen to be a woman, which I think you have never really known. But I doubt if you are a man; you don't seem like one. I think you are just a doll, my poor Harry!"

Her contempt filled him with a tremendous physical excitement.

"A doll, am I?" he said. "You know better than that. I could crush you with loving you!"

And then suddenly all her anger went out like a blown candle in the wind, and the eternal need of being loved filled her through and through. But in the strength and purity of that, there was for the moment hardly anything physical. She longed for him, but not his mere masculine strength. There was some virility of soul which mattered so much more than that. She got up and came close to him.

"No, Harry, not like that," she said. "I—I am not your mistress. We must be more at one. Don't you feel the difference? I want you—oh, I ache with wanting! But I must have all of you."

She longed for a certain insistence on his part that would convince her that she had all of him. But it did not come. Her own plain-speaking had made him for the moment honest to the core. He knew what she meant, and blustered no assertion.

"I am always waiting for you, Harry," she added.

CHAPTER XV

THERE are storms in the physical world which but clear the air and restore serenity to the weather; others seem only to upset and unsettle it, so that a period of uncertainty and fitfulness results. And this is true also of the internal weather of the mind, and it is to be feared that the disturbance lately recorded belonged to the less beneficial class of storm. That, at any rate, was Harry's judgment on it, when, three or four evenings after this, he was rowing himself home along the coast-line outside Porto-fino. He had sailed out alone, since Eleanor was occupied after lunch, and now the wind had completely dropped, and he had to dig at the sea for every yard of his homeward journey. Above him, on the landward side, rose the sheer brown rocks, at whose base a long oily swell coming in from the open sea, broke into white licking lips of spray, and boomed in the hollows beneath them. The heat reverberated from them, and from the dazzle of sun on the surrounding waters. He was tired and hot, and resented all things—his laborious spading of the sea, the fact that he was alone and the reason for it, the whole colour and temper of his life.

There was no doubt also that, apart from heat, fatigue, and windlessness, he had certain grounds for ill-temper, though those grounds were really quite capable of bearing a fruit of kindly tenderness and legitimate amusement. A few days ago, as he and Eleanor were returning from their evening walk up among the hills, they had met on the cobbled mule-path a young woman coming up from Porto-fino. She was a *contadina* clearly, a red kerchief bound over her comely hair, barefooted, with the coarsened hands of rough manual work. But her face was arresting, and, as they passed, he had said to Eleanor:

"By Jove, what a pretty girl!"

Eleanor had seen her, too, and had stopped.

"Oh, Harry!" she said. "It must be one of them—of my mother's people, I mean. She is the image of the miniature of my mother that daddy has."

He thought for a moment.

"I remember," he said, "down at Bracebridge. Why do you mind, Nellie? I shouldn't mind having such a pretty cousin, if she is a cousin."

For Eleanor's eyes had suddenly got dim.

"Oh, don't you see what a brute I have been?" she said. "I have been here all these days, and not asked a single question about them."

"But what are you going to do?" asked Harry, as she turned back and went up the path after the girl.

"Only just ask her," she said. "Wait for me."

She caught the girl up, and he saw question and answer passing between them. Then Eleanor took the girl's hands and kissed her.

"Harry, dear, come here!" she called down the path.

"This is Maria Perilli," she said to him. "Her father is my mother's brother. Ecco, il mio sposo, Maria," she added, introducing him.

Nothing would satisfy Eleanor, but that they must instantly go back with Maria to their house and see the rest of the family, and this embarrassing visit was made. The father was still out at work, but his anxious early-old wife was there, who, as soon as she had grasped the fact that this illustrious stranger who lived in the Castello at Paraggi was a cousin, was instantly eloquent over the hardness of the times and the illness of the cow. There were two quite young children also, who held out grubby hands, and demanded *soldi*; but Eleanor's warmth of clanship never wavered. She kissed the dirty little faces, and found *soldi* for their hands, which their mother instantly confiscated, and insisted that the whole family should come and have lunch with her at the Castello. They had come to-day, all but the two small children, who had been left at home, merely locked into the house, and the meal had been of matchless ill-ease. They were all *endimanchées* and on bad terms with their uncomfortable clothes; the cow had died, and Aunt Perilli, bedewing the maccaroni with dropping tears, gave the history of its demise in voluble Italian, unintelligible except to the butler, who had to act as interpreter. The topic was clearly polemical, for Uncle Perilli had loud altercation with his wife, over the question of how the cow could have been saved, and Giovanni's interpretation was brief and contemptuous.

"They are quarrelling, signora, as the *contadini* will."

Then he spoke sharply to Uncle Perilli, and the raised

voice was lowered. "I tell him to behave himself, signora," he said, "when he comes out to dinner with excellency."

The direful meal proceeded, Giovanni keeping his eye on Uncle Perilli, and clearly giving only just as much wine as he thought good for him, while Eleanor strove by means of brave and slightly operatic Italian to infuse some spirit of geniality into the intercourse. But though she was not particularly successful, her failure appeared not to weigh on her mind in the slightest; these were relations, her cousin and her uncle, and they were haloed by that secret glow which, all her life, had burned in her love for her mother, and her father's strange youthful romance. Then, when they had finished eating, and sat out on the loggia towards the sea with their coffee, and, Giovanni's policeman-like presence being removed, the altercation about the cow broke out afresh.

Harry, in kindlier mood, might have been amused with these really dreadful people, or touched by Eleanor's delicious cordiality to them, because of their relationship. Clearly this was an instinct to her, and in no way a duty. But for himself he only saw a pair of boorish peasants, with a pretty, but intolerably stupid, daughter. However, as far as could be judged, they had no intention of ever going away, and Uncle Perilli, meantime, was rapidly draining the house of its cigarettes, which he smoked continuously, lighting one from the other. Then, after an hour or two of this, he heard Eleanor ask them if they would have tea, and the offer was immediately accepted.

"Will you tell Giovanni to bring tea, dear?" she said to him. "And, oh, Harry, do go out if you feel inclined; I can manage quite well alone. Say good-bye to them and go."

The sound of the foreign tongue roused Uncle Perilli to a great effort of memory.

"I spik Englis," he said.

Eleanor turned to him with much geniality.

"E bene! Molto bene!" she said.

"Si; I spik Englis," said Uncle Perilli again, for this was the limit of his accomplishment.

As he rowed laboriously along in the blinding glare, Harry thought of the afternoon with amazing rancour. It was quite likely that those intolerable people would be encouraged by Eleanor to stop to dinner as well, in which case he thought he would really go and dine at some hotel in Porto-fino. Family affection was no doubt an excellent thing, but when

affection was quite impossible, a five pound note would have been so much the better way to discharge the obligation of relationship. It would have been easier to the giver, and probably far more acceptable to the recipient. . . . Then at last he passed round the promontory of Porto-fino, where the rocks gave shelter from the westerly sun, and there was calm water in place of that long oily swell, and he put down his oars, and sat in the bottom of the boat to rest and cool himself.

It was not only this intolerable incursion of peasants that depressed and irritated him. He was bored with the place and the outdoor simplicity of the life that so charmed Eleanor, and he was bored—though this was the first time he realized this—with her simplicity. He knew well her great-heartedness, her nobility of soul, her love for him, but all these failed to touch or stimulate him. True, only a few days before, her sudden burst of anger had excited and charmed him, but it seemed that she did not care for him to be like that. She had repelled him; had said she was not his mistress. He tried to tell himself that he did not understand what she did want, but he knew, and knew that he knew. His love for her had coarsened in fibre, for it partook of the quality of his nature, which had coarsened too. How that had happened he knew perfectly well.

He could not work. This was another disheartening circumstance, and what made that the more ominous was that once or twice, unknown to her and unsuspected by her, he had rowelled himself with the spur to which hitherto his brain had never failed to answer. He had got whisky from Santa Margherita, and, telling her that the Uncontrollable had rung the bell, had sat up, soaking himself into activity. The general lines of his play were already planned, and he had anticipated no difficulty in the execution of it, but no creativeness of brain had resulted. He but drank himself into a sense of well-being, and from that into mere stupor. His brain was stimulated, but not into creation; for a period it glowed with vividness of vision, but the visions were all concerned, not with what he wanted to produce, but with the weeks that had begun for him last Easter, and finished for him at the end of July. There had been two factors that stimulated him then. Here one was missing. He longed for the other.

Yet it had been something to be able to feel keenly again, to be able with vividness to recall a passion even when it had been renounced, and as he sat here this afternoon, cooling down after his labours in the sun, he began to wonder whether

there was time to row across to Santa Margherita before dinner. If only a breeze would spring up, that would make all things easy, but he still was reluctant to make further physical effort to obtain what something within him, however feebly, renounced. If a breeze sprang up—there was nothing less likely—he would go ; such was his decision. If not, he would be very firm with himself.

Already he was playing with the thought, allowing it to roam about his mind, weakening his own power of resistance. Then came a further ingenuity, a reason, apart from this, of going to Santa Margherita. For Louis Grey, who had been in Venice, was arriving this evening to spend a few days with them. It would be a pleasant attention, one, too, that would charm Eleanor and give evidence of his cordiality, if he went there, in order to meet him, and take him back by sea. He was not arriving till seven, when it would be cooler, and even if it was necessary to row all the way home, there would be nothing penal in it. Besides, there was no whisky in the house, an oversight in hospitality. He could bring it back quite openly.

And then such little power of resistance as was now left in him snapped, for not fifty yards from him there came round the corner of the point a ripple on the top of the swell, making the water look dark and shadowed. In two minutes his sail was up, and he rowed out to it. If the drink did not stimulate him to creativeness of brain, it would make vivid to him again certain memories. . . .

The breeze favoured his course, and it was but necessary to make a couple of tacks in order to reach Santa Margherita. He had a field-glass on board, and, passing not a couple of hundred yards from the Castello, he could with ease see Eleanor's visitors still sitting in the loggia. But the thought of them gave him now no sense of annoyance, he but admired and appreciated Eleanor's endless patience. Yet it was hardly patience ; there was too much of genial welcome in it. That was so characteristic of her ; she found something to interest her in the most boorish and languid of bores. She was all sweetness and goodness, he felt himself not the least worthy of her, but with the sense of unworthiness there came not the least resolve and scarcely desire to make himself less abject. She was made like that. He was made differently, and character was the one inalterable thing in a man's personality. That, the typical consolation of the feeble, was already his solace. He told himself he could not be different, because he was not different.

He was adept at the management of a boat, and, indeed, in this wind, there was little to engage his attention. He fixed a point on the land, and steered towards it, easily measuring where his task would take him. Meantime the slumberous roll of the boat, clucking and smacking as it crossed a wave of the swell, and burying its bow with a gurgle of content as it slid into the trough, made thought fluid. He was to meet a good friend of his, who, incidentally, was in love with his wife. So much Eleanor had told him—actually told him. The fact did not seem to shock her, it would be absurd if it shocked him. But Louis was going to stay with them; and he wondered what would be Eleanor's feelings if he asked Marian to make the party square, not, of course, harbouring the smallest intention of doing so, but letting his thoughts stray idly and viciously. He began to feel that an insult was offered him in the fact of Louis coming to them, and yet he did not resent it. Eleanor had welcomed the notion. She had said that Louis would be a man in the house, a companion for himself. What lay behind that? Yet he knew that he was thinking wickedly, unpardonably. . . .

Eleanor was both comic and contrite over the visit of her relations, who, it appeared, had only just left when her husband and Louis arrived from Santa Margherita.

"They stopped till seven," she said, "a little call of six and a half hours. An uncle of mine, Mr. Grey, and his wife and daughter, peasants. My mother was an Italian peasant, and you should have seen Harry's face when, in the middle of the afternoon—they arrived at half-past twelve—I asked them if they would like some tea. Harry dear, I was so sorry for you, but what could I do? The cow! Oh, dear me, the cow! And Giovanni's contempt. When they quarrelled, Mr. Grey, our butler rebuked them. But I love simple people, and I am going to see them to-morrow."

"Do you mean they are coming to spend the day with us again to-morrow?" asked Harry, in a studiously impartial voice.

"No, dear; there are limits to what even husbands must be expected to endure. I shall go to see them. Harry, I longed to photograph you about four o'clock, and call it 'The Last Straw.' I was so sorry for you. But you did look funny."

He laughed. There was a little vinegar in it.

"Well, there is no occasion for us to delight in each other's

relations," he said. "I don't inflict mine on you. If I were you, Nellie, I should send them five pounds for a new cow. Or do new cows cost more than that? Send them enough for a second-hand cow, slightly damaged."

"Oh, I did that to-day," said she.

It was not long after dinner that Harry left the other two together, saying that he was going upstairs to work. Never before had he felt his weakness so rampant; it had become of terrible and evil strength. He no longer longed for stimulant to spur his brain to intellectual activity, using an evil means for what was after all a fine end: the evil means now were but to give him an evil mood. He wanted to make vivid to himself the fascination of the woman who, even at this distance, exercised so powerful a spell over him. But he had to be prepared for interruptions, and he put conspicuous on his table a bottle of Nocera water, while he hid in his cupboard the other bottle, the contents of which he sparingly diluted. Then he made a moderate disorder of papers on his desk, giving it an air of industry, and sat down at it opposite the open window. The breeze had died away again, but the great swell which betokened some storm out to sea had increased in volume, and broke in thunderous tumult on the rocks below. A moon rode high in a serene heaven; looking at the sky above, you would have said that the whole earth slept, but below, the great forces were active and awake. It was like that here in this sea-girt house in affairs not only physical; he himself was surge-swept. Louis, too—Louis was in the grip of the force; only Eleanor sat aloft, like the moon, serene and undisturbed. A woman's love, he told himself, must be different from a man's; it was something protected and harboured in a tideless sea. No ebb and flow of the water plucked at its moorings, no alien winds made it fret to follow.

Suddenly he took up his pen; it was no stress of creative force that made him want to write. He wanted only to record this simile of the unquiet sea and the serene moon. Sometime, perhaps, when his withered brain put out shoots again it might be useful to have it, so vivid to him at this moment was his alcoholized impression of it. Then, even before he put pen to paper, he saw how fitly it was addressed by him to Marian, how fitly, too, it came into the second act of the play he was supposed to be working at. The man pleaded with a formal, crystallized wife . . . yet what he wrote fitted both situations.

"Here am I, then. Because I eat my food, and perform the ordinary superficial actions of every day, you think probably I am content. You judge stupidly and superficially if you think that. Looking at the sky to-night, you would say that there was a halcyon peace on the world. But listen; the ground-swell below is tearing down the beach, and dragging it into tumult of black waters. That is me, and you sit aloof, looking incuriously on the agitation. Yet you shared it once; you were the wave that covered me with liquid darkness and the foam of your caresses. Once you felt, too. I have your own feeling. Now you no longer care. . . ."

Harry threw down his pen; this was the most degrading stuff, considered as a speech in a play. Someone surely would shout: "Hoist the storm-cone there, Bill!" No one could carry off such villainous bombast. And yet there was something frightfully true about it. It had the ring of sincerity, in spite of its atrocious language. Only in the play it was addressed to a chilly wife; in his heart the same words were addressed, with bitter appropriateness, to his mistress.

His brain was roused now to its highest pitch of perception, and the ashes of the past leapt into vivid flame. He felt that he must let her know how it was with him, for her last letter, in which, as Eleanor had so easily guessed, she gave up her "leavings," had remained unanswered. No doubt she thought that his heart as well as his mere bodily presence was with his wife in this marine idyll of reconciliation and forgiveness. It was intolerable she should think that. Drunkenly he told himself that he must make her see that, though he recognized the obligations which parted them, he recognized also the bond that held them together. He took the half-covered sheet on which he had scribbled this speech, and wrote at the top: "This is part of my new play. I wanted you to see it." She would understand.

Then, swift as the stroke of a bird's wing, his exaltation was extinguished, and a pall of utter blackness descended on him, made up not wholly of evil yearnings and the reaction of his own mad self-indulgence. He knew how tender and loving and wholesome was the heart that had its place so close to his own, and there was just enough decency in him to make him despair at himself for finding that it did not touch him. As she had said, she always waited for him, and yet she could not help him, because his whole self did not want to go to her. He knew that if he came to her fully, she would forgive with

plenitude of all her heart, and he had not the will to claim that perfect gift. He didn't want it enough. That was part at least of his misery.

Then came a doubt; was he his real self when he was like thus, or when he was sober? When sober he knew that he was Eleanor's, that he was devoted to his own regeneration. But what if his real self was that which he used to unloose, so that he could write, by alcohol, and which now he had unloosed so that he could think with vividness about Marian? That seemed so possible; he might so easily be one of those undervitalized persons who had to be strung up to the level of their real personality by stimulants. God made all sorts of people; cripples and *crétins* were born into the world, and none blamed them, only pitied them for their deformities and limitations. He perhaps was mentally crippled, but with drink he could straighten himself up, and achieve and feel. Surely that was better than being a mere vegetable, a cow that but grazed and was milk-barren. Whatever the cost was, he had to feel, he had to convince himself of his own vitality. There was justification for his drinking; he was bound to drink. In his fuddled state he was sure that he was thinking very logically and convincingly.

He heard steps on the stair, and voices, and Eleanor's laugh. Louis' room was on the landing outside; his and Eleanor's opened from this sitting-room where he wrote, and she would have to pass through it on her way to bed. But his table was at the far end of it by the window; in all probability she would go through the room, seeing he was at work, without a word to him, and as she entered he put his left elbow upon the table, shielding his face from her, and picking up his pen, made random dots and dashes on the paper, so that he might appear to be writing. But this movement of his arm knocked over the empty glass which stood by him, which broke into fragments on the floor.

"Oh, clumsy!" she said. "How's the work, dear?"

He made some commonplace reply, telling himself that his voice was in control, but something in it arrested her attention, and she came past the door into the bedroom along to where he sat. He felt a sudden wild spasm of anger at her, anger so deeply felt that it was hate. If she discovered his condition, he thought he would be unable to bear whatever followed on her part, whether it was reproach, or love, or pity, without losing control over himself, and saying . . . there was nothing

he would stick at. He did not look up, and she, her fear a little alert, came up behind him, and saw his paper half covered with meaningless, sprawling scribbles. Close by his hand lay the one speech he had written.

"And did the Uncontrollable shut up, so that you had to make wiggle-waggles to encourage it?" she asked, sitting down. "Do read me what you've written, Harry."

Again his anger at this interruption and certain detection flared up into hatred of her, and the desire to hurt her was uncontrollable.

"Yes, I'll read it to you," he said.

As he read the poor bombastic stuff, the essential and personal truth which it contained blazed over higher in his brain.

"And I wrote this at the top," he said when he had finished. "This is part of my new play; I wanted you to see it."

There was no need for any explanation; she knew as well as he did to whom it was addressed; for the rest the condition he was in was as evident. There was but one more insult he could throw in her face, and he knew it.

"So while Louis has been making love to you downstairs," he said, "I've been making love to Marian up here."

Eleanor gave one little quick-drawn gasp. Then she spoke quite calmly, with quiet authority.

"I take no account of what you say to me, Harry," she said, "because you are not yourself. For the same reason I take no account of what you have written there. Tear it up."

"Dashed if I do," said he. "It's going to be sent to England by the post to-morrow morning."

She got up from her chair, and took it from his desk.

"Don't dare to tear it," he said. "I'll teach you better if you do."

She went white to the lips, with an anger infinitely stronger than his.

"I was going to let you destroy it," she said, "to save your dignity. But as you have spoken to me like that, I shall do it myself."

She tore it across and across, throwing the pieces in his face, and with a furious oath he pushed back his chair and caught her by the arms.

"Do you want Mr. Grey to hear you?" she said, speaking very low. "He will if you don't take care. Perhaps you think I shall call him to help me. Upon my word, you deserve that I should, and point you out to him as a drunken, faithless

brute. Harry, if I had one grain of fear of you, I should call at once. But I have none. If you pushed me over the edge of the balcony I shouldn't be afraid of you. There are two reasons—one that even now I love you, the other that I despise and pity you. Let go of me at once. Quick!"

Probably she was physically fully as strong as he, but not one fibre of muscle did she use, but stood absolutely limp and unresisting of body. But her will was as tense as his was slack, and she fought him with no other weapon. Presently he dropped his hold of her, but still stood glowering in front of her.

"Sit down," she said, pointing to the chair, and he obeyed. She stood over him, looking like some wonderful statue of force.

"Now!" she said. "Where is the rest of the stuff you have been drinking?"

He pointed to the cupboard, without notion why he obeyed her. She went to it, and took out the half-empty bottle.

"I suppose you bought it in Santa Margherita this evening," she said.

She went out on to the balcony with it, and flung it outwards into the darkness. It broke on the rocks fifty feet below. Then she came back, and sat down on a chair near him.

"Harry, don't break my heart," she said, and burst into a passion of sobbing.

His spasm of hate had passed; he was unable to withhold a maudlin, stupified admiration for her utter fearlessness of him. He had known himself how dangerous he had felt, when she tore his wretched speech in fragments, how short a way below the surface lay violence and mere brutality. Had she been ever so little afraid of him, he would probably have struck her; it was the completeness of her contemptuous confidence that he dared not which was the cause of his not daring. Beaten though he was, apparently without effort on her part, he could not help applauding so hollow a victory over so paltry an antagonist as himself. And now she had given way utterly, longing for the comfort that only he, who had insulted and outraged her, could give him.

But for a little while all that was weak and evil in him was strong. For the last two hours he had been soaking his soul in the thought of the woman who had done so much to ruin it, just as he had soaked himself in that poison on

which his brain throve and expanded. He tried to steel himself against the abandoned appeal of her bowed head and convulsed shoulders. But either he had not the energy to embrace evil with a whole heart, or it was that his heart was not yet wholly surrendered to it. But he did not go to her yet.

"I can't bear your crying," he said, thinking chiefly of the discomfort it brought him. "Do stop."

There was a long pause. The huge soft surf beat on the rocks below; the sobbing beat on his heart. Then he came close to her, and laid a trembling uncertain hand on her head.

"Nellie, don't give me up," he said.

It might be a drowning cry, but it was still his cry, not yet quite sunk. She would have come from the poles to it, or from Heaven. It would have sounded in her ears louder than the quiring of the seraphim; the deeper the hell from which that appeal came, the swifter would have been her succour. And she raised that sweet face, all distorted with abandoned hopeless crying, to him.

"God bless you for wanting me, Harry!" she said.

She dried her eyes, and the sobs began to subside.

"We must try again, dear," she said. "And—and not be discouraged. But it is no use talking or thinking any more to-night."

Then she set her teeth a moment.

"Can you get to bed all right, Harry?" she asked. "I will help you if you cannot."

The existence of the intimacy between Harry and Marian Anstruther had, as is usual in such cases, been known to half the world all the summer, and the world, with its cynical common sense, had put in this instance the correct interpretation on it. Louis Grey was among these, and his knowledge of the actress led his judgment to coincide with that verdict. Rumour also of Harry's habitual intemperance was commonly spread along that wireless mechanism which makes network in the life of cities, and disseminates falsehood so much more frequently than it divulges truth, but gives to both the same wealth of detail. It was consequently with a very keen and entirely laudable desire to observe for himself that he came to them at Paraggi, for his love for Eleanor was of a nature that was worthy to be called by that name. It did not "seek its own," in fact, and it envied not, and he therefore, from whom it sprang, placed above all other desires in his

mind the desire for her happiness. He believed, instructed by that mysterious intuition that is characteristic of love, and so seldom errs, that she knew of his devotion to her but, even if so, he scarcely blamed himself for having betrayed it, since, if she knew, she entirely trusted him, and let no fear of any indiscretion on his part interfere with the perfect naturalness of their intercourse. It was impossible also to doubt that she loved her husband, and thus his eagerness to disbelieve on personal evidence any of these stories about Harry was part of his desire for her happiness. The temptation to wish otherwise—to wish, that is, that they were all true, and that some crisis of discovery would separate husband and wife—often assailed him, but his love for Eleanor was impregnable to it, and the assault ineffectual. The thought of a possible gain to himself could not stand in the presence of his love for her. His heart glowed, or sometimes ached, at the thought of what might have been, but that might-have-been could not be desired by him if for its attainment sorrow and trouble must come to her. Besides, he was Harry's friend, and his friendship was every whit as sterling in its kind as his love, and that made it impossible for him not to want to be persuaded of the untruths that attributed to Harry a degraded and sensual nature. Also his love for her shone on her husband; he whom she loved stood higher than and beyond the ordinary friendship of man to man. He wished Harry well, since he was hers, with something of the same passionateness as he desired her happiness. But for all these reasons he wanted with great intensity to know how things were with them; that desire, which was second only to the desire to see her, had made him propose his visit.

For the next day or two the joyous sanity of their outdoor life led him almost to believe that all the tongues of rumour lied, so *insouciant* to all appearance was Eleanor's love for the sea and the sun. It did not occur to him to think it possible that she had anything to scratch and to bite in the words of her own Rat-Wife behind her enjoyment. She bathed, he with her, and lay out in the sun, and discussed somewhat discursively, for the time of work was not yet, the Shakespearian revivals of the autumn. There was sailing also, where with enthusiasm that was only equalled by her ignorance in naval matters she took the helm, and directed random and misbegotten operations. She would put about, and warn her passengers of the inboard swing of the boom, and the boom never swung but they were left with sails spilt

of wind on an inharmonious sea. Or without warning from her the same boom would execute a swift decapitating manœuvre amid passionate expostulations from her crew. Or lying on the beach, she would tell a tale of a shark that had been caught close to the shore only a week ago, in whose incredible belly had been found the hind-leg of a horse, a woman's clothing, a complete porpoise, and a tunny-fish, and next moment, declaring that the heat on the beach was unbearable, she would swim a quarter of a mile out to sea, heedless of the possible existence of other romantic monsters. From her at any rate Louis drew no sign of any domestic scratchings, and it warmed his heart to doubt their existence. Nor did Harry fail to strengthen such doubt. Less vividly than she, he appeared to acquiesce with great cheerfulness in the world as it was, and in no way to fall short of the demeanour of a happy husband. His work, it is true, seemed to worry him a little, but Louis, a worker himself, knew that all achievement, if it was worth anything, came into the world with Eve's curse on it.

Then came a break in the perfect August weather, and a couple of days of sultry and cloud-ridden skies, in place of the glittering serenity of blue, ushered in a streaming tempest of sirocco, hot and rain-ridden. For the jubilant and azure seas there was given a phalanx of monstrous billows, inky-grey, with bridles and harness of vexed foam lying loose on their untamed necks, for the brooding of the untroubled sunshine, streaks of spirted rain, driven horizontally by the maniac charioteers from the south-west. The woods lay huddled and dim beneath the lash of the storm, and from a dozen points in the bay streams long summer-dry poured their torrents of turgid water that stained the sea yellow. Thick on the open loggia lay the leaves and branches which the wind had shredded from the pines, and the feathers of the tall pampas grasses lay stripped and soaked like formless fleeces on the gravel. There was something exciting and disquieting to the mind in this rage of the world's forces, as well as bewildering to the senses, and Eleanor, such was the effect on her individually, made incontrollably restless, yet ecstatic, at this splendid tumult, had started off, directly after breakfast, for an unaccompanied walk.

"If anybody else wants to walk," she said, "I beg him not to come with me. I want to go quite alone. The wind has got into my head, and I am mad."

The effect on Harry was strangely dissimilar.

"I hate it," he said. "I am sure there is always a wind in hell. I want to shut the shutters and light the lamps."

Louis allied himself with this defensive policy, and they went upstairs together, after Eleanor had gone, to Harry's sitting-room, which on the leeward of the house knew less of the tempest.

"That is what the ground-swell meant," he said. "Do you remember, the evening you came, there was a big sea? I knew trouble was coming."

Louis made an intelligent remark or two about cyclonic disturbance and settled down to the two-day-old English paper, while Harry, restless as Eleanor, paced up and down the room, frowning and sombre.

"It's so insensate, all that expenditure of energy," he said. "Probably the force, if properly stored, would work all the dynamos in London, and light the town with electricity for a week."

"Oh, I rather like a few things still at large," said Louis. "It's unutilitarian, I know, but I don't want everything put into cages. Mankind is rapidly turning the world into a sort of Zoological Gardens. They've caught Niagara; they've caught the Jungfrau, and put a railway up it——"

Harry interrupted.

"Oh, tame everything, tame everything, and put us all into cages," he said. "I wish someone would put me into a cage, and let me just sleep and eat, so that I needn't work any more, and needn't struggle any more. If one was definitely in a cage one wouldn't want to work or struggle. They would provide one with a mate, I suppose, and one's children would have a neat label in front of their cages with 'Born and bred in the Zoo' on it. By Gad! my tired man in the play might say that sort of thing. He's a rotter, something like me."

"Oh, are you a rotter?" asked Louis. "What a pity!"

His heart sank somehow, for he had a feeling that Harry was not talking quite randomly from general upset of nerves at this tempestuous morning, and when Harry spoke he had that strange consciousness that he knew what he was going to say. It seemed that it all had happened before, that he had sat with Harry, while a tempest roared outside, in a big dark room like this. Step by step his brain appeared to anticipate what was said, and what happened. And it began so quietly.

"Yes, it's a pity," said Harry, "as you so justly remark.

Shakespeare wrote some rot about a thing being a pity and being true. As long as a cheap phrase is old, it is thought proverbial. The only good point, apparently, in proverbs is their age. What a consolation that would be if it applied to the human race! Jove, there's more play there if I could work it."

Louis still felt as if he was acting in some preordained scene; whatever he said would prove to have been written for him.

"How you fellows give yourselves away!" he said. "Is this the magic of writing, that you say something quite excellently, and then see how you can bring it in?"

Harry had taken up his pen. At this he threw it down.

"That's the way I write now," he said, "just because I don't write now. To go back a little, I said I was a rotter. Can you conceive a more convincing rotter than a man who grasps at straws like that, in the hope they will make him swim? Look here, Louis, you are a friend of us both, aren't you, both Eleanor and me?"

"You need have no doubt of that," he said.

Harry was in the clutch of his temperament. His temperament, weak and womanlike, demanded the self-indulgence of confession. He wanted to show his shame; his individuality, if you will, craved for recognition, and, egoistically, he longed to prostrate himself, not only to Eleanor, who in some sense was part of himself, but to an outside observer. Curiosity also was an ingredient in his mood; he wanted to know if the buried things on which Eleanor sat, as on a grave, with such smiling imperturbability, were known elsewhere. It is only the saint who for charity's sake does not let his left hand know what his right hand doeth, and it is only the utterly lost who have no curiosity as to the figure they cut in the world, nor wonder what their right-hand neighbour thinks of them. And Louis was a right-hand neighbour; that subtle self-indulgence that prompts many confessions excited by the storm cried to be known, especially if it was already known. Also Louis loved his wife; there was drama abroad.

"Well, then, I speak to you as Eleanor's friend and mine," he said. "First of all, have you heard anything about me?"

"Concerning what?" asked Louis, uselessly fencing.

Harry got up, stung into a blind impatience. He felt sure Louis had heard.

"Concerning me and my charming habits," he said. "I

think you must have heard that I am a drunkard, and that I have been on terms of, shall we say close friendship with Marian Anstruther."

This time Louis faced it. There was no use in trying to turn the subject off. Besides there was just a hope left that Harry had spoken of these things only to deny them.

"Since you ask," he said, "I have heard both these reports, and I have treated them as I treat all gossip about friends whenever it reaches me."

"How is that?" asked Harry.

"Denied it, of course. And now, for God's sake, old boy, do the same, and tell me that there is no truth in either of them."

"But there is. They are both true," said Harry.

There was a long silence. Outside the rain drove in volleys by, and the wind squealed around the angle of the house. Then Harry spoke again.

"You see, I've gone to the devil," he said, "and I wonder whether that is another of the bournes from which no traveller returns. I'm weak, man; that's part of me. I'm decadent, degenerate, what you will. But don't think that I acquiesce. This morning, for instance, I loathe what I am. I see how bestial it all is, but then you see I can't write unless I have been drinking, while lately I can't write even if I have. But drink makes me happy; it makes me not ashamed any more; it makes me acquiesce. Do you suppose one goes to the devil just for fun, or that it's for fun that I stand here pillorying myself for your benefit? I would to God I was different, and yet . . . if I was different I should no longer be myself."

Louis Grey got up.

"Don't argue about it," he said, "for there's nothing to argue about. You've been making a beast of yourself, old chap, and you've got to stop. We all go to the devil at times, but we come back, and behave like decent folk again, as you are behaving now, living with your wife as a proper man should. Thank God, nobody could be so wicked as to tell her. But if you want a motive strong enough to brace the merest jelly-fish, there it is for you. Just imagine if she knew!"

A look of sympathy and pity came over Harry's face. It was needless perhaps to enlighten Louis on that point, for he knew how it would hurt him. On the other hand, he could not with any energy deceive him about it, or with conviction ejaculate on the horror of Eleanor's knowing. But it was

no use saying anything more to Louis with this misunderstanding in his mind, because, believing that Eleanor did not know, he was utterly incapable of seeing the situation. And it would be uselessly cruel to tell him. So he merely assented, and dropped the entire subject, abruptly, perhaps, but really there ceased to be any point in his confession. It seemed so natural to him that Eleanor did know that he had never imagined Louis would not understand that.

Louis resumed his interrupted news; Harry took up his pen again. Their conversation had been as fruitless as a spent wave. It had toppled high, promising catastrophe, but the reflux from some other wave, so to speak, had sucked it into itself. But after a moment Louis laid his resumed paper down.

"Harry," he said, "you assented just now. You let it pass when I spoke of avoiding the possibility of what you have told me coming to your wife. All you can do, and God speed you in it, is to give no further grounds for its truth. But do tell me, in just one word, that you feel sure she knows nothing of it, and suspects nothing."

Harry instantly put down the dry pen. He was tremendously interested.

"Why do you ask that so specially?" he said.

"Because I specially want to know. I can't explain. But I should love to have your definite assurance about it. I know you have implied your assurance. I can't help wanting more than the mere implication. Give it me, and then curse me and my distrust if you like!"

"Mistrust?" asked Harry.

"Yes, because I want more than an implied acquiescence. You needn't bother yourself to guess the reason. Neither you nor your wife can ever know it. So, like a good chap, just tell me you have no cause to think that she conceives the possibility of this intimacy."

Harry stood up, pushing back his chair, that grated on the stone floor.

"She knows all about it," he said. "She caught us, Marian and me, together in the flat in Mount Street. Oh, damned dramatic!"

Louis sat quite quiet for a moment.

"Does it come in a play?" he asked, "or did it happen?"

"Happened, you ass," said Harry.

Again there was a pause.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "for calling you an ass.

Simply I can't imagine your not knowing. It seems funny. Now you have asked me an intimate question, and I have given you the real answer. My turn now. Why does it matter to you ? Why shouldn't Eleanor and I lead our lives as we please ? You tell me I can never know, nor Eleanor either, why you are so anxious about us. So much the worse for us. But if we can't know, we have the inalienable right of guessing. Isn't it all rather absurd ? After all——"

Through the darkness of the day a sudden flash of lightning shone, and through the squeal of the storm a thunderclap answered audibly.

"God's anger," said Harry. "I hate thunder. But why are you anxious about us ? Aren't we good friends ? Or do you wish her a better fate ?"

"I wish nothing but her happiness," said Louis quietly.

"And yours ?" asked Harry.

"I have mine."

There must have been the devil abroad that morning. And he was busy.

"In seeing her waste herself on me ?" said Harry.

"Not at all. In seeing her love you."

"While you love her ?"

"While I love her," said Louis.

Again the mad riot of wind and rain was overscored by a more insistent tumult. A bull's-eye of lightning illuminated the dark room, a crash of thunder, close following, silenced the screaming wind. To the north the sky was grey with the rain-laden sirocco, but to the south, and moving swiftly up, was a blackness infinitely more menacing. Already it reached to the zenith, and from time to time a furious scribble of violet fire flashed from it, and the stunning crack of immediate thunder made the windows shake. Inside the room the darkness deepened momently.

"And she is out in it," said Harry, with a sudden stab of anxiety at heart.

Even as he spoke the door opened, and someone entered. It was impossible to see who it was. But on the moment the room leaped into awful light again, and they saw it was she.

"Ah, thank God, you are back !" said Harry, running to her.

The thunder drowned her reply, but Louis could see that he clung to her, all dripping as she was. It seemed to him that within his soul no less fearful a storm was raging.

CHAPTER XVI

THE Shakespearian revivals which had started six weeks ago at the beginning of October with "The Winter's Tale" had been a great success, and there was still no thought about putting a second play into rehearsal. There were crowded houses every night, and the advance booking promised no falling off right up till Christmas. Eleanor doubled the parts of Hermione and Perdita, and violent was the disaccord as to whether she was the more irresistible in her sweet womanhood or as the gay and tender girl. She was a little young for the mother, but even so, were there not mothers who looked young enough to be their own daughters? Besides, as Perdita, it was not credible that she was more than sixteen, and Hermione might be supposed to have perhaps reached the mature age of thirty-four. . . . She did not look it, but she might be thirty-four. And the dance, and the statue scene . . . London raved.

Eleanor found it all hugely delightful. Success is sweet to everyone but the cynical, who, owing to Nature's laudable abhorrence of waste, seldom attain it, and it was a very big asset towards her happiness. But in other ways there was a rather serious deficit. She was not at all happy about Harry, nor could she be, since it was clear that he was not happy. In conduct he had been absolutely unimpeachable, but, oh, the dreariness of it! He seemed to have lost all his vitality; he moped like a sick animal; and yet to all appearances he was perfectly well, and a doctor, to whom she had persuaded him to go, gave the same verdict. He was diligent, pathetically diligent, in his attempts to work, and daily he ground out a few meagre pages of the sorriest stuff, as nerveless and devitalized as himself. The play he had written for Marian Anstruther was still running and doing well, and only last night he had been to see it. He had told Eleanor he was going.

"I want to see it," he said, "because I think it may buck me up. It isn't in the least that I want to see her. But I won't go if you would rather I did not."

"Oh, my dear, by all means go!" she said. "And, Harry, do realize that I trust you. It sounds priggish somehow when it is said, but I'm not a prig. I do trust you."

He was silent a moment.

"I don't see how you can," he said.

"I know you feel that. But you won't understand what you are to me until you realize it."

But this experiment had not been successful, and next morning it brought forth a lugubrious philosophy.

"I despair when I think that only a few months ago I wrote that," he said. "Why, there's life in it! The thing moves. I felt as if I was my own corpse looking at myself still alive. Rather a difficult operation, eh? And certainly not a pleasant one. And now I write this sort of twaddle! I say, Eleanor, it's an awful thing to be dead, especially when you are young. I feel as if—as if I had got under the ice. I'm caught there, and there's a cold lid over my head."

Eleanor would not let her heart sink, though there was a dreadful reality in this metaphor.

"My dear, you must have patience," she said.

"I think I am having patience," he said. "It isn't so difficult, if you don't care about anything. I don't care about my work—there isn't any work to care about—I don't care about—well—her——"

Harry stopped; then went on again, speaking quickly.

"There's one thing in the world I do appreciate," he said, "and that's your goodness and loving-kindness to me. I want you to know that. But I speak from under the ice."

The bitterness of the word "appreciate" soaked into Eleanor's soul. But it made no bitterness there.

"Harry, you make me feel as if I had failed somehow," she said. "Can you not tell me where I have failed? Because when a man gives himself to a woman, as you did give yourself to me, it is her business to keep him in love—in love with life anyhow."

She turned to him, and he saw exactly all that he had fallen in love with—the tremulous, irregular smile, the wealth of hair, the unvarying love of her eyes. But it moved him no longer; nothing moved him.

"It is you who must have patience," he said, "and God knows how infinite your patience is. I can't feel: that's what is the matter with me. I am sure it is my own fault. I blunted normal perception by always stimulating it. Now, when I don't stimulate it, it won't write; it is a blunt pencil; it makes no marks."

That apportionment of blame was probably quite correct. But in her mind there was no question of blame at all. All that concerned her was this beloved wreck.

"And I don't know that it helps me to pay two guineas in order to have it called 'neurasthenia.' I can say neurasthenia without going to a doctor," he said. "I saw Sir James last week, you know. He asked me—I don't think I told you that—whether I had been intemperate."

Her fingers closed on his arm.

"Harry, you never told me," she said, but without reproach.

"There was no use. However, there it was. I admitted the soft impeachment. I did tell you that he said he thought I should get better. He prescribed exactly what you prescribed a year ago. He gave me a tonic, too. Isn't it funny how doctors still think that if you drink what they give you it will make a difference. It's—it's like trying to put out the flames of hell with a medicine-bottle."

And then for the first time Eleanor had felt herself helpless. This gradually increasing apathy had been gaining on him since those days at Paraggi. At first she had welcomed the ease with which he kept off drink; then she had seen that what she welcomed was not a successful fight, but merely the failure of one out of the hundred desires that are normal to a man. He was ceasing to care for anything; alcohol was included in the number. It was not that he was victorious, but that there was a general laying down of arms. He and his desires were drowsy; she would have welcomed now any sign of desire. Even if he had wanted to drink again, it would have been something; even if he had wanted to see Marian again. . . . All her personal self retched at the motion, but something lying within that, more sacred and inexpressible, would have flushed with joy at the thought that he wanted anything. It was this inner desolation of spirit that paralyzed her. But she made a huge effort to rise above her own despondency.

"You are too clever with words," she said. "You can always phrase a thing so that it sounds true. Hell and a medicine-bottle! Let's put it in other words. Slight nervous attack and a tonic."

"You can put it in any way that sounds most comfortable," said he. "To change a dismal subject, you are going down to Bracebridge to-morrow for the Sunday, aren't you? I think I won't come with you."

"No, dear, why should you?" said she. "But what will you do? Louis wants you to go down to Esher with him, doesn't he? Will you go?"

"I think that would be rather a bore!" said he. "There's a bright party. I think I shall just stop here."

He got up.

"I want to get to the bottom of all this, Nellie," he said, "if it has a bottom. I will stop here, and take my time, and try to work. But I think if I came with you, and we had sausages for breakfast, and the church, and the roast beef and the Sunday-school, and then those damned church-bells, and the cold supper and prayers and 'The Christian Year,' I should go mad."

Eleanor laughed.

"Harry, dear, you are not under the ice yet," she said. "Nobody under the ice could talk so feelingly about Sundays at Bracebridge. Why, of course, you shall stop here, or go to Louis, just as you choose, or go to the Zoo, or—or anywhere."

She paused.

"I might go to daddy's another Sunday, and stop here with you, if you cared for me to," she said, rather timidly.

He shook his head.

"No, don't do that," he said. "He wants you; he was looking forward to your visit."

His face suddenly twitched with some ungovernable pain.

"I wish to God I wanted you," he exclaimed.

The sincerity redeemed the brutality of it, and only the terrible pathos of his words smote Eleanor, not their cruelty, nor their egoism.

"Oh, poor Harry!" she said.

He looked at her sombrely, as if trying to recall some memory of beautiful things that had passed out of his life.

"I can hardly remember what it feels like to want," he said, "or to be glad, or to be anything. The last time I felt anything was the day when we had that terrible storm at Paraggi. You were out in it, and I was so relieved when you got back. Since then, nothing."

Eleanor was to drive down that night, after her performance at the theatre, to Bracebridge, and when she came out with her maid, she found the motor, with her luggage for the week-end, waiting for her. As always happened now, the pavement was lined with a loyal and expectant gallery and pit, and that little reception of loiterers moved her more

keenly than the applause of the theatre itself. She felt a closer bond with those who eagerly waited in this cold and foggy November night to see, not Hermione, but herself, than with the comfortable folk who had dined, and diamonded themselves, and sat in the stalls. The commissionaire to-night had to clear a lane for her before she could reach the motor at all, and the shouts of "'Ere she comes! 'Ere she comes!" had a far more intimate and precious note to her than the gloved applause. Men and white-faced boys, rough women and feather-hatted girls, were all there, making a living wall through which she passed, and, with her short-sighted gaze and delicious smile, she cast her "good-nights" right and left. To-night a grimy hand was held out, and with a glee, something between laughter and tears, she took and shook it. Then came a whole company of hands, and, dropping the little bag which she carried, leaving it for her maid to pick up, her hands went right and left. Something in her heart went out to all those dear strangers; they were so kind. . . . And on the step of her motor she turned round and smiled again.

"Thank you all so much," she said. "I only hope you enjoyed it half as much as I did."

She sank back in her seat with the warmth of her gratitude and simplicity almost kindling her severe maid. And then suddenly the thought of Harry, which all evening had been a black background to her mind, leaped into prominence again, so that she had to make a call on her good sense not to tell the chauffeur to drive back to Mount Street in order that she might satisfy her unreasonable uneasiness. Of course, that would never do; Harry would think that there was still within her some mistrust, would think that she remembered the terrible night when she arrived there before unexpectedly. But if it had not been for that she would have gone. Her maid disapproved of these late excursions. She had been packing at the flat during the play, and had only come back to the theatre ten minutes before. So she proceeded to cheer Eleanor up.

"Those were new gloves you had on to-night, ma'am," she said, "when you shook hands with all those common people at the door."

Eleanor was a slave to this ruthless personage. She would have liked very much to dismiss her, but Miss Handen was elderly and hard-featured, and little likely to get anything like such a good place as she had now. When Eleanor was

late going to bed, she pulled her hair and scratched her with the comb to express her disapproval. That was when Eleanor forgot to tell her that she need not sit up. She often forgot.

"Yes, I know they were," she said. "But it isn't very late, Handen. We shall get home before one."

"Yes, ma'am, if we're not taken up for exceeding the limit. I expect the house will be shut up."

"Had Mr. Harry gone to bed when you came to the theatre?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. He was sitting working. And Morris said he hardly touched his dinner. I think Mr. Harry looks far from well, ma'am. Not that it's any business of mine."

Eleanor could not help her irritation and weariness escaping her.

"No, Handen, it isn't," she said. "Please give me a cigarette."

Handen produced a small case out of the bag Eleanor had let drop.

"I hope you've got matches, ma'am," she said.

"No, of course I haven't. Didn't you bring any?"

"No, ma'am; I'm not used to my mistresses smoking, and it slipped my memory."

Then this terrible person relented a little.

"I've no doubt Ferris has some," she said. "Shall I put down the window and ask?"

Eleanor pulled herself up for being cross.

"Oh, what a good idea, Handen," she said. "I should never have thought of it."

"I expect play-acting takes a great deal of your attention, ma'am" said Handen, with quite unusual cordiality. Then she became a little more improving again. "Though they say smoking is discolouring to the teeth," she observed.

Eleanor giggled very privately over this after Ferris had been found to be provided with this essential prefix to the discoloration of the teeth, and then her mind brooded back to her maid's dispiriting information. Certainly she was anxious about Harry, but as often as she put definite questions to her anxiety, demanding to know what it feared, it had no answer to give her, beyond what she already knew. She felt she had some premonition of trouble, and yet she had no idea what trouble was foreboded. Perhaps she had been infected with his nervous despondency, and yet she told herself it was not that. And she saw that the cigarette which she had been

at such pains to light had gone out untasted, and she threw it through the window.

The fog was but local, and a clear night of stars welcomed their arrival at the house that was still wrapped thickly round with home-fibres, that seemed to her, since her marriage, not to have loosened but tightened their clinging grip on her heart. There was the orchard where her father had found her with the surreptitious copy of some play . . . what was it? . . . there was his study window, from which light shone through the red blind. Perhaps he was sitting up for her, for which he must certainly be a little scolded, and then told how darling it was of him. She would have liked one glimpse of him, one word with him to-night, for a sense of disaster, purely nervous, stood close to her, and that dear presence might conjure it away.

But the light there only showed a little tray of somewhat dispiriting supper laid out for her—a leg of chicken, with stout blue hair-roots showing in the yellowish skin, a decanter of what seemed like sherry, a hunch of bread, and a bottle of fizzy lemonade. Prominent on the tray, too, was a note directed to her in her stepmother's firm hand. For all its welcome there was something dispiriting about it also. It ran:

"My dear Eleanor,

"We both sat up for you till twelve, but then I knew it would make you feel uncomfortable to find your father up later than that, as he has early service to-morrow, and I made him go to bed. I hope you will find your supper comfortable; I had it laid in your father's study, as I knew you might wish to have a cigarette afterwards. It will be a pleasure to see you in the morning, and I particularly want, dear Eleanor, to have a serious talk with you, if you can spare me the time. Good-night. I had the fire in your bedroom made up the last thing."

Eleanor made an attempt on the chicken-leg, wondering what the serious talk was to be about. Her stepmother had been in London for a week not long ago, and had come twice to see her in "The Winter's Tale," so there could not be any suggestion of impropriety there, else she would not have come for the second time. Nor could it be about cigarettes . . . and then she pushed her plate away, feeling sick with the thought that she had perhaps guessed what this was about. Supposing she had heard some random gossip concerning

Harry. Eleanor had not been able to speak to her father, even, about that, though she knew that talk had been going on, for there was no hand in the world kind enough to touch that wound, and she could guess, with a shiver of anticipated pain, the sort of handling it would receive from her stepmother. However, it was but a mere conjecture that this would be the subject of the serious talk, and there was no good in worrying herself about it.

She did not have the cigarette for which these preparations had been made, and very few minutes afterwards she went quietly upstairs, tiptoeing along the passage. Only an eager ear could have heard her go, but as she passed the door of her father's dressing-room it opened noiselessly, and he looked out, clothed in his sleeping-suit.

"Hush!" he said gently.

Eleanor understood, and kissed him quietly.

"Darling daddy!" she said, and went on to her room.

For a little while as she undressed that one word and silent caress spread round her the sense of happiness and security again, but once more her fears, still quite vague and formless, reasserted themselves, and, lying wakeful looking at the roaring fire which seemed to scorch her eyes across the room, she made a determined effort to reason herself out of them. Yet it was neither this, nor that, nor the other, that disquieted her; it seemed much more probable that she disquieted herself in vain. In any case, if there was anything wrong, she would know early in the morning, when the telegraph-office was open . . . or she could send Ferris up to London if her fears persisted . . . and she was going to have a serious talk with her stepmother. . . . The topics lost their sharp edge, blended and melted into each other, and she fell into a sleep that at first was dreamless through her mere fatigue. Then as morning drew on her sleep became charged with dim, delightful thoughts. Harry was with her, having returned from some long journey, and there never had been anything the matter, except his absence. And when she woke Handen had already drawn back her curtains, and the red early sunlight of the November morning streamed into her room.

She was very late for breakfast, and, remembering the ritual of the house, entered the dining-room with her penny ready for the poor-box. Alice was away, and there were but the two of them there. But even as she entered she felt that something was wrong, and all her fears came flooding back. She dropped the penny on the hearthrug.

"What is it?" she said to her stepmother. "Is there anything the matter? Have you heard anything?"

Then she remembered about the serious talk.

"Have you heard anything just now, I mean?" she said. "No bad news?"

Her father got up.

"My dearest Nellie, indeed no," he said.

Eleanor pulled herself together; she had no idea till then how anxious she had felt.

"Ah, that's all right, then," she said, smiling. "I was very tired, I think, last night, and was full of fears. There is no telegram for me, or anything? No? Then I have simply been making a fool of myself. My penny? There it is, mamma. I am so sorry for being so late. And how kind of you to put supper for me in the study. Daddy, dear, bless you!"

She felt an extraordinary reaction, for she had said to herself definitely that, if there was no bad news in the morning, she would abandon her unfounded terrors. She had not feared that Harry would drink; she had not feared he would go to Marian, for he was too apathetic for that, and but yesterday she had almost wished that any desire, even the most deplorable, would come back to him. And now she thought she knew what she had feared—illness, accident, death, something of that kind, some external calamity, so to speak, not a calamity that would in itself be almost a blessing if it came from him in the desire for anything. And her spirits, since her fears were now shown unfounded, rose with the mercurial rapidity that was part of herself.

"Oh, daddy, sausages!" she said. "You have no idea how I pined for sausages all the time I was out at Paraggi. There was coffee for breakfast, and bread—I think it must have been the bread of deceit which comes in the Proverbs—and boiled eggs in a soup-plate full of tepid water."

"Bread of deceit, let me see," said Mrs. Ramsden brightly. "The bread of deceit is the portion of fools. Is that the text, Eleanor?"

"It sounds like it," said she. "I only remember Bread of Deceit as such an excellent title. Certainly we were all fools there, Harry and I, and Louis Grey came to stay with us, and we all played the fool tremendously. I haven't told you about it; we bathed and boated, and went for huge excursions——"

She suddenly became aware, as the least self-conscious

people can, that she was not in tune with her society. Mrs. Ramsden's face assumed a nameless chill; she directed, and Eleanor intercepted, a raising of her rather wiry eyelids towards her husband. And once again Eleanor's spirits descended into a gulf. It was more than a gulf; it was the pit into which the executed descends, and that glance was the drawing of the bolt.

"Mr. Grey stayed with us," she said. "There was a thunderstorm one morning, and he and Harry were alone; I had gone for a walk."

She could not keep it up. Once more the idea of the "serious interview" crossed her mind, and now it seemed to her that she had the correct key of it. Surely it was to concern herself and Louis. Then a moment's thought robbed it of any conceivable terror. If it was only that, who cared? Certainly she herself knew that Louis loved her. But with all her affection for him—and she wore the knowledge of that like a decoration—he was so wise, so . . . it was better than wise . . . so straight. And once more she rebounded.

"Mamma, I hope you liked 'The Winter's Tale,'" she said. "You went twice, didn't you? So I suppose you liked it the first time. Isn't it lovely to have the two parts to play, so that sometimes you are your own daughter and sometimes your own mother. Do tell me, do we romp too much in the Perdita scene? It's so hard to help it, because it is such fun."

Mrs. Ramsden made an awful grimace, which was intended to be a Christian smile.

"Dear Eleanor," she said, "both your father and I always strive to banish all thoughts of purely worldly matters from our minds on Sunday morning. Perhaps it seems very strange to you that we should do so, very narrow, perhaps, very Puritanized. But you must be indulgent to our old-fashioned notions."

Eleanor made a perfectly natural gesture, putting up her hand over her eyes for a moment, and then withdrawing it, and using it for the manipulation of her fork.

"Ah, how stupid of me," she said. "But I am so relieved to think that all my fears—— Daddy, dear, do you preach this morning? May I come and sit in my old seat just underneath the pulpit? Do you remember how you dropped your sermon once over the edge of the pulpit when you were praying, and I gave it you back just at the moment the offertory sentences ended, and the choir sang 'Amen' exactly as I gave it you, as if they had Amened that?"

He laughed.

"Dear me, yes," he said. "How odd that a little thing like that should remain in one's memory for years when so many big things fade."

"And what was the sermon about?" asked Mrs. Ramdsen eagerly.

"Oh, I remember that, too," said Eleanor. "It was one of the nicest daddy ever preached, on 'Charity suffereth long, and is kind.'"

"The Epistle for Quinquagesima Sunday," said Mrs. Ramsden, as if that was the really important thing. "I am sure, James, though I do not remember the sermon myself, that you explained to us that 'love' is the correct, and, indeed, the revised, rendering for 'charity.'"

"And that is where my memory fails, my dear," said he.

Mrs. Ramsden folded up her napkin very neatly, and stood warming her dry almost chalky-looking hands at the fire.

"The last Sunday that you were down here, dear Eleanor," she said, "you did not, if I recollect right, go to church on Sunday morning. Perhaps you had a cold; no doubt you had a cold. I was ready therefore to stay in with you this morning, and we could have a little talk. But since just now you spoke of going to church, could you spare me a little of your time after lunch to-day? I can arrange to get someone else to take my class in the Sunday-school for once."

There was, then, no doubt as to the solemnity of the occasion, and Eleanor, who wanted with some secret childlike yearning as much as from religious motives, it is to be feared, to sit in her old seat just below the pulpit, agreed to the later appointment. She wanted, with that very human longing common to all those who have passed over the threshold into the House of Life, to stand once more at its doors, and to recapture the wonder and eagerness with which then we look into the vista of its rooms, and wonder what unseen presences are waiting for us there. And that seat in church was very closely intertwined with her childish days. She had made so many vows and excellent resolutions there, which sprang from the sense of peace and aspiration that hung about the place, and this morning she felt in extreme need both of peace and of wisdom. The vague uneasiness about Harry she tried to put away from her, and all thought of what this interview this afternoon might be concerned with, for, apart from these, she knew how well-founded her real anxiety about him was.

She felt sure, too, that serenity was needed on her part; she had to be infinitely patient, utterly confident that he would come out from this cloud of apathy and dejection which darkened him, and which, God help the poor darling, he himself, as far as could humanly be judged, had caused to obscure the clarity of his wayward brilliant brain.

And, sitting there that morning, she found, as she focussed her mind on her prayers through him as it were, like a glass, all sense of blame, or of personal reproach at what he had done, utterly cleared off her soul, and at last she need look no longer through him to the help which she sought, but could feel herself carrying him in her arms, as the most precious and the dearest thing that God had given her, into the presence of Christ. Then she stood, holding him out to the hand that blessed, even as once, when the sun was set, they brought the sick, and He healed them. And, filled with the peace that is the firstfruit of love, she no longer fretted, nor inquired, nor cared to know how the healing might be accomplished. It might be through suffering, and if that was to be, there was no other way so good; it might be through death, even, and though something in her throat tugged and swelled at that thought, still the peace enveloped her, for death can no more disturb that than can a child splashing with its hand on the infinite sea disturb the quiet of the depths. . . . "And, dear God," so her petition ran, "if only what must be borne can be borne by me instead of him, I should so love to know that I had got some of it. . . ."

Then a little more light broke.

"Perhaps all the anxiety of this last year was part of it," she said to herself, "and, oh, if somehow that was sent to make me worthier to help him, I am glad. But give me more anxiety, if that is so . . ."

With the faith of childhood that had never deserted her there was present also to her the simplicity of childhood. As the juggler danced before the image of Our Lady, so now, when there was service perhaps to be done, Eleanor offered up her best. She wanted to tell God that she was ready, and she laid herself before Him as simply as she would have spoken to her father.

"I know I only offer You what is Yours," she said, "but I just want to offer it before You ask it of me. There is nothing I want to withhold. . . ."

Her thoughts reviewed what she had vowed, looking to see if she made any reservation. She felt she had very little to

give; there was her acting, such as it was, and the money it brought, and the love she had of it. There was a great friendship in her life, but that was unhesitatingly added to the rest. There was a possibility of misunderstanding with her father—dimly she saw that—and yet there was no sigh in her soul as she gave that too. No; she wanted to keep nothing if only that which she had brought in her arms might find healing.

But yet she still wanted a little for herself. She had yet to get rid of that. The picture she drew in her mind was still that of Harry with her, restored, loving her. She still "sought her own" a little. . . . And here was the hardest thing of all.

The tempest of personal love, so noble in itself, but yet not the noblest, made havoc of her peace that seemed but a little while ago to have so utterly possessed her, and she saw that she must get into an atmosphere more open than that. She still reserved the "golden hours of dreams" that her father had spoken to her about a few years ago for herself and Harry. She still thought of peace coming to them together there. But that had to be given, too. If she did not give it, perhaps God would not ask for it. He did not always ask for a thing, though He always took it when it was given. And she hardly knew if He would approve of her final gift. But long ago, six months ago, she would have allowed, and did allow Harry to go to Marian if he wished. It had not been easy to give Harry that permission. Now she had to give God the permission for him to go. In no other way could she utterly give herself up. Perhaps He would be shocked at the idea, and yet who knew? She herself was shocked at it, but it was possible she was mistaken. In any case it mattered more to her than to anyone else, because she loved Harry. But if, for once in a way, all the world was wrong, and it was right for him to fulfil himself in some inexplicable way like this, she had to acquiesce, and not only make it easy for him, but make it inevitable for herself. She had to desire it, if that was best for him. She must keep nothing back. Or was this some wile of the devil which led her to wish to give God a thing that had the horror of sin clinging to it? If so, she hoped God would pardon her, for she had not meant it like that.

For a long time she had been conscious of nothing that was going on round her, and part of the delight of this little seat just below the pulpit in childish days had been that you were not observed there. The high backs of other pews

formed a screen in front, behind were the tall walls of the pulpit. Then she became aware that she was still kneeling, and that her father's voice sounded close above her. He was preaching in the language that was understanded of the people.

"The moment you say, 'Can I afford it?' it means that you are thinking of yourself. You may say about something you know you should do, 'It will break my heart to do it.' Perhaps you are right, and it will break your heart. But, my dear people, let your heart break. A broken and a contrite heart He does not despise. I am sure we are meant to be happy, that He means us to be happy, that it is His will, but sometimes we can't fulfil His will, unless we give our hearts to be broken. . . ."

Eleanor gave one long sob.

"Oh, daddy darling," she said to herself, "I give it!"

Again she buried her face, and the cost of the sacrifice, the desolation and outer darkness, which was exactly that which made the sacrifice, else it would have been none, overwhelmed her. Her will desired nothing to be left for herself. She stripped herself in intention of all she had, or thought beautiful and loved. She left herself no semblance of humanity. A little naked, tired soul lay before Him who made it. She had been caused to exist; she gave herself back, reserving nothing.

And then the one certain, obvious miracle happened—the miracle that is in need of no explanation, because it itself explains everything, and is as clear as the simplest of mathematical laws. The peace that passed understanding accepted her, and her surrender. It had been there for ever, waiting. She had only to know it was there—that was all that was required of her—and to recognize its presence. The moment her whole soul saw and needed it, it was open to her. Then . . . it was not that it was withdrawn at all, but she knew that her difficulties and perplexities still had to be faced and dealed with. There was no less need of effort and struggle on her part, nor of patience and serenity and good sense. She still had to grope and scramble in this fog of human life, without expecting what might be called a conjuring-trick. But for that moment she and all her troubles had come into the presence of the peace of God.

The afternoon grew chilly, and when Mrs. Ramsden went with Eleanor into the drawing-room where they were to have their talk she lit the fire. Unless Alice took her class here,

the room was unused till tea-time, since on Sunday nobody had a moment to spare before that time, and very few then.

That done, she sat down in a chair opposite Eleanor.

"My dear Eleanor, it is now no use beating about the bush," she said—as if sometimes it was any good doing so—"and I will come to the point at once. As you know, I was in London last week, and I heard certain things which concerned you and Harry which I feel bound to speak to you about. I need not tell you how painful it is to me to do so, but since I am completely convinced that it is my duty, you may be sure that even if it was twice as painful I should not shrink from it. I urged your father to speak to you instead, but he utterly refused to do it."

Eleanor drew her chair a little away from the strongly-blazing fire—a little away also from her stepmother.

"Did he say why?" she asked.

"Yes. That, again, is painful for me to speak of, but I will tell you. He said he would not insult you by mentioning anything of the kind to you. He urged me with vehemence, I may say, not to do so either. But he left me quite unconvinced."

Mrs. Ramsden drew a handkerchief from her pocket, and wiped her eyes.

"I have never quarrelled with your father before," she said. "Often we have agreed to differ, but the difference between us was never vital. I have often thought him too lenient in his views; he has often thought me too hard. I am aware that you think me hard, too."

Eleanor was touched to the quick. She drew her chair forward again.

"Oh, mamma, I am so sorry that there has been trouble between daddy and you!" she said. "I—I know how you both would feel it. Please remember, whatever you have to say to me, that I am so much grieved about that. But I quite agree that it is no use beating about the bush, so perhaps we had better talk of that afterwards, and you had better tell me quite straight and now what you have heard."

Silently she accused herself of a long course of injustice, but literally she had not known till that moment that her stepmother "felt," as she called feeling. Eleanor knew she was hard, and she had thought that the hardness went right through her nature. Clearly it did not. Though her sense of duty was paramount even now, it had evidently struggled to get uppermost.

"I agree with you," said Mrs. Ramsden, in a queer, strangled

voice. "There are two things I must tell you. The first is that I have heard that you and Mr. Grey are—are lovers."

Eleanor sat for a moment quite quietly. She tried to remember the peace into which she had passed this morning, but the righteous human indignation washed it off her memory. She tried to deny what had been said gently, but she could not. There was an awful stillness about her when she spoke.

"I wonder that you dare to say that to me," she said. "It is a damned lie. Oh, I am not swearing. I mean just that. Don't speak, please. I want to say something more."

She sat with the dreadful silence in the room, broken only by a cheerful and insane ticking of the clock, for a moment or two.

"I don't want to know who told you," she said. "It doesn't interest me in the slightest. All I know is that you have told me. Now you must wait a minute: if I go on speaking now I don't know what I shall say in answer to such devilish. . . . Oh, I thought I was in peace this morning! Dear God! Dear God!"

The thought of that made her sick with disappointment. But a few hours ago she had felt so secure and serene, and now, when a test came, it all broke down. But as her anger grew less red, no peace took its place, but only a sense of desolation.

"Indeed, I don't know why you should think me so vile," she said. "You should not think me vile lightly like that. Well, I have told you it is a lie. I had better neither say nor think anything more about it. Or perhaps I had better say one thing more. I am sure he loves me, but then he is not vile, either. Otherwise he would not be my dear friend."

"Ah, then there was some foundation for it!" said Mrs. Ramsden.

"Please explain what you mean."

"Eleanor, you have admitted that he loves you. Is not that sufficient to make evil reports? You act with him every night, you . . ."

And then, looking at Eleanor, she could not at once go on. There was an innocence about her face that was sacred. And yet Mrs. Ramsden's awful sense of duty, hard, and warped, and sterile, forbade the complete surrender.

"My dear Eleanor," she said, "I need not tell you how rejoiced I am to learn from your own lips that there is no shred of truth in what I heard. But are you wise to be friends with him, and to let him make love to you in the theatre as you do? Are you not possibly giving offence to some of those little ones?"

It was intolerable.

"You seem to have been among the little ones," she said. "Or perhaps I wrong them, unless it is their habit to believe and report ugly and disgusting gossip. Did you hear it from a little one? Or did you pick it up in a sewer? And are you not ashamed?"

There was nothing left now of the pity that Eleanor had felt at the thought of her father's quarrel with his wife.

"I must ask if you have been spreading the report you have heard," she said.

And then once again Mrs. Ramsden's handkerchief was needed. What Eleanor had said seemed to her the most cruel injustice, and from her point of view she could not possibly see how reasonable the injustice was.

"I think you can't understand how I feel about such things," she said. "I think the woman who has a husband whom she loves is so utterly vile if she lets another man even make love to her. Perhaps a married woman may get tired of her husband, and fall in love with somebody else. Poor wretch! But if only you knew what Harry was to me! It was my knowledge of that which made me angry. I don't see how I could have helped it."

Eleanor leaned forward, and some shadow of a smile flickered on her mouth. "But you couldn't have known," she said. "I see that now. You must forgive me. Well, there were two things you had to tell me. That is one."

Mrs. Ramsden knew that it was necessary to suffer in good causes. She had suffered over this, but her zeal was not exhausted. And in some dreadful secret manner, before she went on to state the second subject, she told herself that Eleanor had asked her forgiveness. Somehow that consoled her inhuman soul.

"The second is no less painful," she said. "I was told also that Harry drank, and that he had an intrigue with a Miss Anstruther."

Eleanor had quite expected that, and the truth of it did not seem to matter one straw. She was fighting for Harry, and nobody had any business to say what had just been told her. She replied without the slightest hesitation.

"And that is all a lie, too," she said. "Shouldn't I have known?"

For a moment she sat congratulating herself on the ease with which she had spoken. She had not the slightest scruple in deceiving Mrs. Ramsden, for there were people who had

better be deceived. Then she realized slowly what her denial meant. Her father knew that this question was to be asked her; he would know her reply to it. If only he had asked her, she would have told him the truth, and consulted his wisdom and his kindness, as she had often thought of doing. And God knew. . . . She had asked for and found peace to-day, because she had kept nothing back. The truth was so big, so big, and lies were always little.

"That sets my mind at rest," said Mrs. Ramsden. "I hope, Eleanor, that I need not remind you how painful it has been to me to do what I considered my duty. I shall certainly confess myself in the wrong to your father, and ask his pardon for doing what, after all, I thought I was bound to do. I was wrong, Eleanor. I—I ask your pardon also."

Eleanor got up quickly, not noticing the hand that was held out to her. She went to the window, and looked out, unseeing. The lawn lay level below the window; beyond was the orchard. . . . Her lie that had seemed so inevitable, became impossible.

"It is true," she said—"it is all true about Harry. But he doesn't drink any more now, and he isn't her lover now. He won't be again; I know he won't."

She turned back swiftly into the room, so submerged in the thought of him that she was both without shame and without reserve. There was just another woman there—nothing more than that—a woman who was married, as she was married, who must know how complete was the desire of her heart.

"Oh, he is so ill!" she said. "His brain is ill, his mind hurts him, his soul is sick. He doesn't care for anything—anything. If he only would care for anything, I think I should welcome it. Oh, mamma, I am so anxious! He has been to doctors, of course, and they can't help him. And whisky can't help him, and Marian can't help him, and I can't help him. He doesn't want any of us. I would let him go—God knows how hard it would be—but I would let him go if he wanted to go. But he doesn't. He said the other day he appreciated my loving-kindness to him. That was so sweet to me. I wonder if I was harsh with him when I knew all about it. I scolded him, I despised him; but right to the end, when he ceased to love anybody, he loved me. What am I to do? I am longing to do anything that will make him happy, or make him care. I will let him go to Marian, if he only will care. But if he gets better, and cares for anything again, perhaps he will care for me."

Mrs. Ramsden was really distressed, but it would be absurd to deny that she did not feel more comfortable. She was on firm ground again; she knew exactly the proper method of acting under these circumstances. But she could not help being shocked.

"And have you known this, Eleanor?" she asked.

"Known it? Yes," said Eleanor. "I am telling you."

Mrs. Ramsden knew that she could help here. She had often helped, truly and really helped, in distressing cases.

"And have you evidence?" she asked.

Eleanor looked at her with a little smile.

"Oh, I suppose so," she said. "Why?"

Mrs. Ramsden came over to her and held her two wrists in a grasp that was meant to be firm, which it was, and kind.

"I know, my dear, how terrible it will be to you," she said, "especially since you are fond of him; but there is only one thing to be done. You must divorce him."

Eleanor looked as if she had not heard.

"Divorce him?" she said.

"But there is no question about it," said Mrs. Ramsden, speaking quite sincerely. "Your position as his wife is impossible, both in the eyes of God and man. I need not tell you how sorry——"

"No, never mind that," said Eleanor.

"How truly sorry I am! But it is your duty; otherwise, you connive at his—it will hurt you—his adultery. You tell me you know it. I do not profess to understand what you say about your longing for him to care for anything. He drinks, too, you say. Have you ever seen him drunk? Has he ill-treated you in any way?"

Eleanor pushed back her hair, freeing one of her hands.

"Has Harry ill-treated me?" she asked. "What *are* you saying?"

"Did he never threaten to strike you?" went on the inexorable machine for . . . for good works. "Were you ever afraid he would?"

Eleanor suddenly remembered the evening at Paraggi, when she had found him tipsy, when she tore his page of play to bits, and threw the fragments at him. Certainly she thought he would strike her, but she had never been afraid.

"Yes, I thought he would strike me once," she said.

"Can you remember the details? Were there any witnesses?"

Eleanor freed her other hand.

"Are you trying to get evidence?" she said. "Otherwise I do not understand your questions."

"My dear Eleanor, you must have evidence, though I dare say your word on oath would be enough. It will be very painful for you, but you must not mind that. You will be happier afterwards. What are the Divorce Courts for?"

"But they are not for me," said Eleanor. "I—I could no more divorce Harry than I could give him reason for divorcing me. Oh, mamma, I don't think you understand anything, anything! You have shown you don't understand me. You don't understand Harry, either. Why, as long as he could feel, he loved me. He—he loved another woman, too. You and I, being women, can't imagine our loving two men without being vile. But a man can, somehow, without being vile. They are different from us . . . they are such babies. Harry is such a baby. Certainly I wish he wasn't, but he is a man. Once I told him that I thought he wasn't. They are tiresome, you know. Perhaps that is why we love them. We want to be loved so tremendously. Of course, they know that. They can't help knowing it, since we make it so perfectly obvious. But, dear mamma, if there is a chance of Harry's loving me again, what should I think of myself if I separated myself from him; if I didn't make him know that, whenever he really, entirely cared, that I was—oh! so ready for him?"

Mrs. Ramsden had no wish to take those strong white wrists in her hands again.

"I can scarcely believe what my ears tell me you say, Eleanor," she said.

"No, mamma," said she; "I was afraid that was so. But—but I was at peace with God this morning."

"I think our talk is finished," said she. "I shall have to tell your father."

"I will," said Eleanor. "I know it would pain you."

"I was only thinking how much it would pain him," said Mrs. Ramsden. "And there is one more thing. I know you have always thought me hard, as I said before. You will think me hard now. But if you continue living with your husband, I must ask you not to think of this house as your home—at least, it cannot be your home and mine also."

"Do you mean that you do not wish me to come here?" asked Eleanor.

"It is no case of wishing—wishing has nothing to do with

it—but there are principles on which I try to act, which override all thought of personal affection——"

She paused a moment, and spoke again with cruel honesty.

"I am referring to my personal affection for your father," she said.

Unconsciously at that moment Eleanor's ear caught the sound of crunched gravel on the path outside, for she turned quickly round to the window, not knowing why she turned. A telegraph boy was just coming up to the door.

"I must see what that is," she said.

She was at the door before he had time to ring, and took the orange-coloured envelope from him. She felt she knew it would be addressed to her, and, scarcely looking at the address, she opened it. She read:

"Your husband has had very bad accident. Come at once."

It was signed by their doctor.

She went back to the drawing-room, where her stepmother was sitting with her face hidden in her hands. All the bitterness, all the just indignation that Eleanor had felt that afternoon was gone the moment she saw what the telegram contained. No trace of any kind remained of it.

"I have to go to London at once, mamma," she said. "Harry has had a very bad accident."

She got up quickly. Hard of soul, she was alert in material aids.

"Oh, Eleanor!" she said. "What can I do? Shall I come up with you? Please—please let me!"

Eleanor kissed her.

"It is so good of you to suggest that," she said. "But I think I will go alone. I must be off as soon as the motor can come round. Daddy is out still. Will you tell him?"

"Of course. . . . I wish I could do something."

Eleanor paused a moment. . . . She did not know if she would be understood.

"You can," she said. "You must think—think kindly of Harry. . . . You must hope; you must pray for him and me. God knows we need it, mamma. . . ."

CHAPTER XVII

ELEANOR had heard all, and was sitting the same night in Harry's study at the flat in Mount Street, letting it sink into her till it became part of herself. As yet the knowledge, though close beside her, so to speak, was outside her. She had not assimilated it yet.

He had sat up very late on Saturday night, for one of the servants heard him moving about in the dining-room at three o'clock. On his desk there were scattered some twenty-five sheets of foolscap, all scribbled on. The earliest ones were in his ordinary neat, precise writing; later, they became sprawling and difficult to read. The last four or five were totally illegible. He had not got up on Sunday morning till nearly lunch-time, and as soon as that was over he had gone out. A minute afterwards he was knocked down by a motor as he crossed Mount Street, and had been brought back here. There was some spinal injury—how grave had not yet been fully determined. But from his waist downwards he appeared to be paralyzed. He had drunk heavily at lunch.

Eleanor was waiting now to hear more, for both doctor and surgeon were with him again. They had arrived nearly an hour ago, and before going to him Sir James had told her what she knew. He had told her all, neither making the worst nor the best of it. Probably—the details did not seem to matter—his spine was injured low down . . . or there might be some injury, not that, from which he could recover . . . or there might be some other internal injury, which would account for the symptoms as they stood. There were just those three things possible, one of which certainly had happened. If the spine was injured there was no reason why he should not live, and live as long as anyone else. If there was some worse injury, which they were now investigating, there was but little hope, and such hope was but despair. The third chance was that the symptoms could be accounted for by some other injury, which time might set right. But in any of the three possibilities, he was now in serious danger.

She cared very little about the manner in which the accident took place. Apparently, he had started to cross the road just outside, and a motor driven rapidly down the straight empty street had turned sharply in order to get out of his way, for he was not in a condition to cross a street. Then, even as it swerved to avoid him, he took a step back, or staggered, had been struck by the mudguard, and thrown against a lamp-post. They found his card with the address on it in his cigarette-case, and as soon as medical assistance arrived he had been brought back here. In his hand had been a telegraph-form addressed to Eleanor, which now, all bedaubed with mud, lay on her knee. It ran:

"M. is dining with me to-night. Please come back this afternoon."

It was just legible—more so than the last pages he had written the night before. It was also, so Eleanor thought, intelligible. She felt sure she knew what blind and pitiful struggle prompted it.

She had not seen him yet. They had told her that the examination of his injuries would take long; it was possible also that they would have to operate at once. Sir James had warned her with regard to this that he was not a good subject. He had seen him before this accident, and knew (she remembered his exact words) his constitution. She knew, too, what that meant.

It had not occurred to her to communicate with Marian, nor was it till the clock on the mantelpiece struck eight that she remembered that she would probably arrive here in a few minutes. She sent for the parlour-maid.

"Miss Anstruther will be here immediately," she said. "Show her straight in."

Even as she spoke the front-door bell rang. Next moment that glorious figure appeared in the doorway, black-haired, black-eyed, radiant in rose-colour. She had a smile on her lips not meant for Eleanor. But without pause she had there another one, which was meant for her.

"But this is delightful," she said. "Harry did not tell me you would be here."

For a moment Eleanor did not speak. She was face to face with the woman whose presence was an outrage to her, who had done her best to take Harry from her, and drawn him along his ruinous path. But immediately all that was best and most real in her swept aside the meaning of that,

supplanting it by a feeling that was rooted deeper still. Though she had been Harry's evil genius, though he, in his last conscious moment, had rebelled at her ascendancy, as the unsent telegram witnessed, yet it must be supposed that she was fond of him. All feelings of outraged wife withered and dropped from Eleanor like the husk of a ripe nut, showing the clear, sweet kernel within. All consciousness even that she was speaking to her husband's mistress died. She herself, who loved Harry, was talking to a woman Harry loved. The manner and misery of it all was of weaker vitality than that central claim. She had to break the news of his accident to one who was very closely bound to him. There was no room in her heart just then for more than pity and gentleness.

"There is bad news, Miss Anstruther," she said. "Harry has had an accident—a very serious one. He was knocked down this afternoon by a motor-car. They telegraphed for me."

Marian gave an exclamation of horror.

"Ah, how dreadful—how dreadful!" she said. "I am so sorry! You mustn't mind my saying that I—I was so fond of him. Perhaps it is insolent of me to say that to you, but it is true."

Eleanor came a step nearer to her with hand held out.

"I am sure of it," she said.

Marian took and pressed her hand.

"It is quite true," she said, speaking quickly and with complete sincerity. "In general I am fond only of myself, but I was very fond of Harry. I know my presence here is only an insult to you, and I will go in a moment; but will you be very kind first, and just tell me how he is? I have no right to ask you even that."

Eleanor looked at her with her quiet, candid gaze.

"You have every right," she said, "and I should be utterly unworthy if just now I let myself—let myself remember anything but that you were fond of him, and he of you. But I can tell you almost nothing. I have not seen him yet. The doctors are with him. But they think his back is badly injured. There may be worse injury as well."

She stopped, and slowly there dawned on her face that sweet and tender smile—a little tremulous, yet still brave.

"We must wait to hear more," she said, "and until then we must hope. Don't let us remember, either of us, anything that has been in the past. It is no time just now either for—for bitterness or regret. And you will want to hear, like

me, as soon as we can hear anything about him. It would be much best if you stopped and had a little dinner with me. I should like to have you here—I should really. I want you —I want anybody who loved Harry. Please say you will. I am here all alone."

For a moment Marian could not speak. There came a sudden contraction on her mouth, a swelling and tugging in her throat. Hard, and cold, and heartless she might be, but there was something in her which could not but respond to a generosity so simple and sublime.

"For shame I could not," she said at length, in a whisper.

"But you must not think of that," said Eleanor. "It is our bargain that neither you nor I think of—of all that. So you will stop? Thank you very much. I will tell them to get us something to eat."

She went out, leaving Marian alone, and, returning a few minutes later, found her flung on the sofa, her face buried in her bare white arms. And it mattered not at all to Eleanor then that those beautiful arms had often been clasped round Harry's neck, nor that his face had often been blinded in the night of her black hair, nor was it of significance to her to know what caused that wild abandonment of sobbing. It might be a sort of selfish shame merely, it might be human and sacred sorrow for one she loved who lay in mortal danger. There might even be mingled with it regret and penitence of a kind holier yet. All that mattered nothing to Eleanor now. The simple and uncomplicated fact that she faced was that there lay here a woman who was crying, who needed comfort if she could give it her, or, if she was in an outer darkness where comfort could not reach her, could anyhow be made to feel that she was not quite alone, but that another woman was near her, who gave her with so unreserved a heart sympathy and companionship. So with gentle touch and murmured words Eleanor sat down beside her, wife by mistress, and ministered to her.

It was an hour later, when the two had dined, and returned again to Harry's sitting-room, that the doctors' examination of him was over, and Sir James came to tell Eleanor the result. She introduced Marian to him as "Miss Anstruther, a friend of Harry's," and the doctor looked sharply at her, bowing stiffly. It required but a few words to state what had taken so long to find out. There was no other injury except the spinal one. If he got over the shock, there was no reason why he should not live for years, but he would

never be able to walk again. But much depended on the next twenty-four hours. The shock to the nervous system had been very severe. . . .

Sir James got up, and sat down again by Eleanor, taking her hand in his.

"You must just wait, my dear," he said, "with all the patience and hope that you can summon. He is not doing very well. There is no marked rally yet in his vital force. That may come; that is what we hope for."

Eleanor nodded; then, after a little pause, she spoke.

"You do really hope for that, Sir James?" she said. "You see what I mean? It would be really better for poor Harry if it came. Life will be worth living, if he lives?"

"My dear, certainly, certainly, for a man with a brain like his. Indeed, I mean it."

"Thank you. And may I see him?"

"Yes. I wish you to, and he also wishes it," said he. "There is something that is bothering him, and I cannot quite make out what it is. He knows you are here, but he wants to know whether it was because of his telegram that you came. He is anxious to know that you received his telegram. Can you make his mind easy about that, or is it some delusion of his?"

Eleanor got up.

"No; I know what he means quite well," she said. "He went out"—and for a moment she glanced across at Marian—"he went out to send a telegram to me. He had not done it when the accident happened, and it was found on him. I have seen it and read it."

"Tell him that, then. Now will you go in, just for a minute? Do not stop long. I will come for you."

As soon as Eleanor had left the room Sir James turned to Marian.

"I take it that you are the Miss Anstruther of whom Mr. Whittaker has been speaking," he said. "It is no concern of mine, of course, but he asked me to tell the servants that if you came here to-night you were to be told he was not in; also that his wife was expected."

Marian bowed, somewhat steelily.

"I stopped here at Mrs. Whittaker's request," she observed.

Harry was lying in the bed in his dressing-room, and Eleanor passed through their bedroom to get to it. There, the surgeon's assistant was just finishing the packing-up of

such things as had been used, and with a little shudder she averted her eyes. The door into the dressing-room was half open, and she went in without pause or tremor, fearing nothing. A nurse was softly busy about the room, putting things tidy, and she smiled to Eleanor as she entered.

"He is in no pain," she said quietly, "and quite conscious. He wants to speak to you privately. I will be in the next room."

There was a screen at the foot of the bed, and Eleanor passed round it. By the head was an electric light turned away from his face, which lay low on a single pillow, white and wide-eyed. When he saw her he tried to raise his head, but it fell back again.

"I'm so weak," he said. "They've been pulling me about. But, Nellie, did you get my telegram? I wrote it, and I went out to send it. Then—I can't remember."

She knelt down by the bed.

"Yes, my darling," she said; "I know you meant to send it. You had written it, and they found it in your hand. That brute of a motor knocked you down before you got to the post-office."

"No, no; not their fault," he said, speaking quickly. "I was tipsy—horribly tipsy. I want to tell you—I must tell you—only I'm so awfully tired and weak. Wait a minute."

The effort had exhausted him, and he lay still for a minute or two.

"The night before," he said—"last night, I suppose—after you had gone, I began drinking, and—and once more it made me want. I wanted to write. I had got things to say again, and I wrote and drank half the night. And then I wanted Marian, and before I went to bed I wrote and asked her to come this evening. And then after lunch I was sorry, and I telegraphed for you. I was muddled, you see. Instead of stopping her, I telegraphed for you. I—I wanted you. If I had only stopped her, I should have been alone, and then . . . then I should have gone to her. Don't give me up, Nellie, for God's sake! I'll try to do better. I've made a hash of it. . . ."

Eleanor gave a great sigh, and kissed the white weak face.

"For your sake and for my own, my darling, as well as God's," she said.

The lids of those staring wide open eyes fluttered a moment.

"That's good," he said. "That makes me feel a little quieter. I feel as if I was all lit up inside my brain—millions of lights—and as if I myself was sitting in a corner of it,

wanting to go to sleep and rest. But your saying that has put some of them out. There's one more thing I want to ask, though. Did Marian come this evening ?"

"Yes, dear. She is here now, waiting for news of you."

"Have you been with her ?" he asked.

Eleanor paused a moment. She knew she had to speak lightly and cheerfully, if she was to quiet him, and for the moment it was difficult, now that she was with him. Thoughts of the past intruded themselves—grey faces, as it were, peering in at the windows of her soul. But she shut them out; she would not regard them.

"Yes, we had dinner together," she said. "You had asked her, you see, and as you weren't there to play host, I had to do it. I shall give her quite a good and jolly account of you.

He did not answer, and Eleanor saw that the fluttering eyelids had lifted again. She had to say something more difficult yet."

"Or would you like to see her, dear ?" she said. "Shall I ask Sir James if he will let you ?"

Then suddenly Harry's eyes grew dim.

"My God, you offer that ?" he said.

"Yes, my darling, of course I do, if you wish it."

Her breath caught a moment.

"Oh, Harry, if you could see my heart you would see how willingly I do it! Only get better, dear. That is what matters."

"No, I don't want to see her," he said. "I am so tired; I only want to go to sleep. Nellie, we are at peace, you and I, are we ?"

Sir James had entered quietly from the other door by the head of the bed, and Eleanor looked at him to see if he wanted her to go. But he only made a sign of assent to her, as if encouraging her to answer. And with that she put into her voice all the authority of her love.

"My darling, you know how we are at peace! Don't think of anything else but that. Let it wrap you round, Harry, like soft clouds at sunset. Wrap yourself in it, and sleep, and when you wake, long, long after, you will find it still soft round you, and quite encompassing you. Good-night, my darling."

Again his eyelids fluttered, and now they completely fell.

"Good-night, Nellie," he said drowsily. "Will you be there when I wake ?"

Eleanor waited without movement just where she was, and then very quietly got up and passed out of the door, which Sir James still held open. The doctor remained behind, and she went back into Harry's study, where she had left Marian. She was sitting there waiting, and got up as Eleanor entered.

"Well ?" she said.

"Harry has gone to sleep," said Eleanor. "It is good so far."

Then the coarser and more selfish nature asserted itself.

"Did he ask after me ?" asked Marian.

"Yes ; he asked if you had come this evening."

"You told him ?"

"Yes ; and I asked if he wanted to see you," said Eleanor. "But—but he was too tired to care about anything. He went to sleep almost immediately."

Marian did not reply for the moment ; then she pointed to the soiled telegram which Harry had gone out to send, and which lay on the table.

"I think I quite understand," she said. "You left that there, and I read it. That gives the gist of it all, does it not ? Sums up the last six months."

Eleanor drew back a little from her. With Harry lying there, helpless and shattered, it seemed to her as if to speak of that side of things was like striking him. She could, and did, try to comfort Marian, because she and Harry had been fond of each other, and because she was in trouble, but it was a very different thing to dwell on their definite relations. The difference might be one of sentiment only — the one was actually identical with the other—yet over the one all her human compassion and charity lovingly expended itself, from the other she shrank as from a thing unclean, that might soil the purity that lies round anyone in mortal danger.

"I can't think of all that just now," she said. "It lies quite outside the crisis where we are !"

Marian shook her head.

"Not to me," she said. "There is Harry's choice written there."

From outside, so it seemed, there came back to Eleanor a sudden flash of her fighting spirit.

"Yes, Harry has chosen," she said.

"And you ?"

"His choice is mine. How could it be otherwise, as I love him ?"

With a sudden impulse Marian went to her and kissed her.

"I am going, then," she said. "And I wish you good luck, you faithful soul. If at any future time things are difficult with him—you can guess what I mean—remember that all that has been in the past was my fault. Hate and curse me, for I deserve it all, and go on loving him."

She turned from her quickly and went towards the door.

"Oh, Marian——" said Eleanor.

She paused without looking round.

"What is it? I can't stop another minute here."

"No; I see. But—God bless you!"

Soon after she had gone Sir James came back from the sick-room with news as good as news just then could be, for Harry was sleeping quietly, and for the present nothing more could be hoped for or desired. The nurse, of course, would sit with him all night, and in case of need he himself could be summoned by telephone. He would in any case pay an early visit to-morrow.

It was still but little after ten o'clock, though to Eleanor it seemed that there had passed a lifetime of sharp-edged experience since that moment, but six hours ago, when she had turned to look out of the drawing-room window at Bracebridge, hearing the crunch of gravel. And yet, woven into that trouble, and all the blackness and suspense that hung over her still, there were points of gold that made the night into a glory of star-shine. Among these was that scene (not strange now that it had happened, but quite simple and natural) which she had had with her husband's mistress. Had she been told, any time during these last months, that she would have met Marian beneath her own roof, would have sat by her and comforted her, would have blessed her as she went away, she would have said that there was no event conceivable that lay so far outside the bounds of possibility. Yet, now that it had happened, it seemed to have been inevitable. She had throughout those months sequestered all thought of Marian in her mind, walling her up, so to speak, incapsulating her, for fear that the enclosed bitterness and hate should poison and blacken her whole being. But now, here was Marian coursing through her blood, so to speak, filling it, not with poison, but with a compassionate tenderness hard to explain, but strangely sweet to experience. But transcending that, burning with a whiter, more triumphant flame, was the thought of Harry's return to her. Even while his blood was on fire with the spirit that had awoke his brain

and his desires again, he had turned back to her at the last moment, and though that return had cost him at the least a lifelong disablement, she could not but feel that even in this shattering and maiming there were the seeds of a wonderful recompense. Harry had turned to her again, even when drunken and inflamed with other desires. The last signal he flew was for her.

Then she looked a little more closely into the night in which such stars as these sang together. His death she did not contemplate at all. Though she knew that his life was still suspended by a thread over the gulf that lies round all earthly existences, she believed with her entire soul that even now he was swinging back over the edge again, and her thoughts clustered like honey-laden bees round their future together. All her heart went out to him in a great gush of tender sympathy at the thought of his restricted activities, but the same love from which that broke forth constructed a future that should be more beautiful than anything in the past had been. Sir James had said that with a brain like his, life was by all means worth the living, and though she knew only too well the conditions under which hitherto his brain had put forth its flowers, it appeared to her that this accident might be just the violent uprooting necessary for its transplantation into a sound and healthy soil. To her, brave and optimistic when there was most call for courage, the star-shine penetrated into the darkest of the night. The golden house of which once she and her father had talked seemed to have begun building in the hour when, to outward view, all was darkest, and to be rising into the horizon of the future, instead of being silhouetted in ruins against the sunset of the past.

Such was the aspect and interpretation of what had happened on which she fixed her faith. Even if her ideal was realized, she knew that for certain there must be days and weeks of difficulty and almost impenetrable gloom in front of them both, but it was her resolve to look through that and out beyond where she believed the golden house would stand. She expected no miracle, and asked for none. She did not think that because Harry had suffered this dreadful maiming, his nature would instantaneously receive such sweetness or strengthening as to render all things easy. She only saw, and that very dimly, that in an accident of this sort, blind and wanton though it might appear, there were features that might be part of a design so beautiful, so wisely planned, that even now she must hold her breath for the wonder of

it. But it was not an easy or effortless thing to concentrate herself on that belief. All that was finest in her had to brace itself in order to realize it, while all the time, so little way below the surface, she shuddered and rebelled at what had come upon them. Had Harry been but one half-second sooner or later in the road outside, the car would have passed him without collision, and he would have sent his telegram. She herself would have come up to London, she supposed, and once more have come in upon him and Marian together. That had happened before, and it seemed that Harry needed something sharper than that, poor darling! Besides, if that terrible collision was a mere accident, a blind, ungoverned conjunction, there was nothing in the world, as she knew it, that was not accidental also. Her meeting with Harry, her love for him—they must be accidents, too. And that was a matter for a smile merely.

She made another visit to Harry's room not long after the doctor had gone, and found him still asleep; and, having made sure that his nurse had all she could need for the night, came back to the study to write some letters that must be posted before midnight. Her father must hear from her by the earliest post, so, too, should her stepmother; but of the two letters, in one, how could her mind outrun her hand? in the other, how difficult would the writing be! She took the one for which she was eager first.

"OH, DADDY" (it ran),

"Mamma will have told you that my darling has had an accident. There is little more to say as yet. It was a motor, and his own fault, he told me. I saw him only for a minute or two, and then, thank God! he went to sleep, which is the first essential for his recovery. Oh, daddy, his spine is injured, he never will be able to walk again, and yet even now it doesn't seem to me cruel or wanton! God allowed it, and so it had to happen, and I can't help feeling that there is something beautiful going to come out of it all. It must have been His will, mustn't it? and so it must be beautiful. And when it happened he was on his way to send me a telegram, asking me to come up to him at once. He wanted me, because he had been weak, and had asked a certain friend —I know mamma has talked to you—to come and see him. So even in the worst of his weakness he turned to me. I feel so proud of that.

"Daddy, I saw her, too. She dined with me, and we

talked, and she was very sorry, and all bitterness, I think, has gone. I have often been a little beast about her in my own heart, but I believe it is all right now. I wonder if you could come up to-morrow and see me? I should like to talk to you, and, I expect, cry a little on your dear old shoulder. You told me once, on one of our Christmas Eve walks, always to come to you in trouble, and so this time you must come to me. You see, I couldn't come to you in what has been trouble before, because it was concerned with my Harry, but now that you know, I want to talk to you so much.

"I have no plans, of course, of any sort. One doesn't know yet what will happen. But I can't believe that Harry is going to leave me, just after he had sent for me like that. Good-night, dear. Send me a telegram to say if you can come. At least, I know you will, but say when I may expect you.

"Your

"NELLIE.

"P.S.—I am not telling mamma that I have seen her, because I think she would see it differently from us, and I don't want to disagree with anybody. So will you not mention it?"

Her heart wrote that, and with her pen she wrote to her stepmother.

Louis Grey had to be written to also, and there was the owner of the motor-car, whose messenger, she learned, was waiting with inquiries. That, again, Eleanor liked writing. She felt so sorry for the innocent cause of the catastrophe, and, luckily, could give him comfort.

"You will like hearing that my husband is going on as well as possible, though his condition is very serious. And I know you will like to know that he told me, in the few minutes that I have seen him, that the accident was entirely his fault. I am so sorry for you."

Then came a tap at the door, and Eleanor put down her pen. The nurse entered.

"He wants to see you," she said, "to be convinced that you haven't left him. I think he will go to sleep again if you come."

Even before Eleanor entered the room she heard him call her.

"Nellie, Nellie," he said, with a sharp ring of anxiety in

his voice. "I want to see you; I want to be sure you are there."

"My darling, of course I am here," she said.

She bent over him and kissed him.

"Yes, that's you," he said. "I thought perhaps you might have left me. There was reason enough."

"You never thought anything of the kind, dear," she said. "Go to sleep again, and don't be silly."

He reached out to her with the hand that always lay outside the bedclothes.

"Hold it in your hand, will you, Nellie?" he said. "I'm —I'm safe then."

She sat down in a chair that the nurse pushed under her close by the bed, and gently rolled up the sleeve of his sleeping-suit, feeling her way up his arm till her hand was clasped round the crook of his elbow. Her thumb lay close in the slack muscle of his arm, her fingers lay across the two bones on the inside of his elbow.

"That's you, Nellie," he said drowsily.

Memories flashed back like fire into her mind. So often, filled through and through with love, had they gone to sleep like that. Now there was sleep only for him; for her, a vigil of love, concentrated and alert. Once, when the quiet pressure of her hand relaxed, he stirred uneasily, but before he came near to waking she had made the familiar pressure again. After a little the nurse came and whispered to her.

"He is fast asleep," she said. "You can get up quietly and go."

But before she had risen he stirred at her movement, and she resumed her position, with a beating thrill of joy that even in sleep he wanted her. Then by degrees the exhaustion of her hours of anxiety and determined hope gained on her, and the golden head swung forward till it rested on her arms and his, and she slept so.

It was from deep untroubled sleep that she woke, waking slowly, knowing only that Harry was close to her, and that one of those blissful nights had come again when there was no shadow between them. To her dawning sense it was one of the earliest nights of all, when she woke slowly like this to the wonder of love. And now, when she came to herself again, and realized where she was, and what had happened, there was no feeling of change. Harry was utterly hers; to her, as ever, there had been no one in the world but he.

The nurse, sitting near, saw her awake, and again spoke to her in whispers.

"You must go to bed," she said. "It is three in the morning, and he will sleep well now."

"Mayn't I stop here?" asked Eleanor.

"No, my dear. Go to rest. He will want you in the morning."

Eleanor got gently up from her chair, and there came no hint of uneasiness from the figure that lay so still. She stood over him for a moment, hands clasped, in an ecstasy of love, bending towards him. Her hair had got unloosed in her vigil, and fell in golden billows round her face, and her eyes, heavy with sleep, yet shone with yearning.

"May I kiss him?" she said to the nurse.

"Yes, my dear. He will sleep the better for it."

Gently she laid her mouth to his forehead, and his eyes, and to his lips. She felt as if she laid her heart there, and that it would slip down to his breast and lie there beating. All the great love and life in it was his. Had it been possible, she would have chosen that her heart and her life should slip from her, and be made one with him, giving him the strength of which she had so much, and all the life of her, which, without him, was worth nothing. In that one moment, when she kissed him, and spread her hands over him, she gave him all she had. There was nothing left of her; the white sleeping face had it all.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE winter sunshine was bright and warm on the garden-front at the Vicarage, though to-morrow would be Christmas Day, and Eleanor dragged a basket-chair through the French windows in the drawing-room, and sat, with her cloak round her, occasionally glancing at the paper, in the brisk windless air. There had been a white frost the night before, but an hour of this warm sunlight had been sufficient to melt it off the grass, and the lawn lay glistening with innumerable diamonds of dew. She looked rather tired and wan, but there was neither any frowning of her brows nor restlessness in her attitude, and her face wore an expression of the kindliest serenity. Little shadows of trouble, it is true, passed over it from time to time, but her face was wonderfully bright behind them. They were but as the shadows of clouds that pass across the blue brightness of some spring day.

The attention she gave to her paper was limited to the most momentary glances, and for the most part her eyes dwelt on the lawn in front of her. There was a robin there, who for the last ten minutes had been gradually coming nearer her by a series of spasmodic hops, between each of which he stood quite still, and had now got to the very edge of the path. In the ivy of the house a bevy of sparrows were employed on some unknown business that demanded a deal of shrill exasperated chirrupings, and a thrush was listening for the movement of worms in the lawn, going from place to place with scudding movements and a head on one side. Then a foolish bluebottle, hybernating somewhere in the frame of the drawing-room window, determined that winter was over, and buzzed noisily forth into the air. Poor soul! That was his last manœuvre. The sparrows issued forth from the ivy in a jostling multitude, and there would be no more winter or spring for him. All those things Eleanor observed in a rather detached manner. Her eyes and attention focussed themselves on the figure of her father, who was coming up the path from the church.

"Oh, daddy, there you are!" she said. "Good-morning, dear. I was lazy, and had breakfast in bed."

He kissed her.

"That's right, Nellie. You look a little tired, my dear," he said pleasantly.

She laughed.

"Yes, I suppose it's because I am a little tired. You would be tired, too, if you had been through this last month. Oh dear, I thought, when my poor darling was doomed to lying still for the rest of his life, that tiredness could never come to me for the joy of making things easier for him."

She punched and folded the cushion in her chair into a more supporting shape.

"Do bring a chair out, and preach me a little sermon, daddy," she said. "I've been letting little clouds come over the face of the sun. I haven't been so rotten as not to know that the sun was there all the time, but I have let little clouds come when there should not have been any at all."

He fetched a chair from his study, and sat down, filling his pipe.

"I ought to be doing my sermon for to-morrow," he said.

"Well, darling, you can do it. You can talk a sermon to me, and I will help you by asking questions. Daddy, is it dreadful of me to get tired, when Harry has one of his bad days, as he did yesterday? It oughtn't to have been tiring, when all the time one's heart knows that it is the greatest privilege that could possibly be given one, to have him pour out his despair. And I know really that he is better when he has uncorked himself like that. But he was so cross with me all yesterday, the darling!"

Mr. Ramsden leaned towards her.

"I know he was," he said, "because he told me so last night. He said he had been a perfect devil to you, to use his own words. And then he said one thing more, which I think I will tell you. He said: 'And all the time I would willingly go to hell for her sake.'"

Eleanor's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Oh, did he—did he?" she cried. "Then it's I who have been the perfect devil, because I let myself wonder whether he wasn't sick and tired of me. Oh, daddy, you know what I mean! My heart didn't wonder, but something in me wondered."

That wise, kind, indulgent smile that Eleanor knew so well and loved so well came over his face.

"Ah, daddy, you can tell me about it, I see," she said.

"Well, yes, my dear; I can tell you a little, and that must do for the sermon. It's this: We must be kind to our own failings, just as we must be kind to the failings of other people. It is arrogance to expect too much of ourselves. We make mistakes every day and all day long, and we must not expect anything else. But there is one thing about which we must make no compromise with regard to ourselves, and that is that our intentions must be right. Harry made a mess of yesterday, and so, perhaps, did you, but I am as certain of Harry's intentions as I am of yours. So don't go on thinking about yesterday. That was my advice to Harry also. Don't feel regretful or repentent. Forget it altogether, and begin again to-day. We want all the energies we can summon to deal with the present, instead of letting them sit mourning in the dust of the past. And of all people in the world, my dear, you, above all, ought not to mourn when you think of the past, and when you consider what Harry was, poor soul! and what he is."

"Oh, daddy! You feel that, do you?" she asked.

"My dear, how could I not feel it? He was—well, he was in a very bad way indeed when that accident happened. If you had been like that, would you not—you, in your own best self—have welcomed it if it was to cure you? It is curing him; it has cured him, perhaps. And then you must be kind and patient, for cures are very often painful processes, and we are apt to cry out against them, and say they are cruel and senseless. But there, as Oliver Cromwell once remarked, when we say that it is just possible that we may be mistaken."

Eleanor gave a long sigh.

"Yes, I see," she said. "But—but it is as if Harry and I were in spring together, and then suddenly, by one stroke, it became autumn."

He laid his hand on her knee.

"My dear Nellie," he said, "as if I did not know that. You mean that you will never have a child by him. I know. But, as it is, you have got Harry. Think! Were there not worse catastrophes possible, probable even? And think again! Every day he is getting better, more active in brain, more—more pathetically eager to make the best of what is left him. As for the being cross, my dear, I can tell you that nurses welcome signs of crossness in their patients, for they know it means that they are getting on, and are beginning to

feel again. What they dislike is apathy. Harry was not very apathetic yesterday."

"No, the duck!" said Eleanor, wiping her eyes. "Oh, daddy, what a miserable little wretch I am! I do want to be bigger!"

"Go on, dear, as you have been doing," he said. "You will get quite large enough."

He beat out the ashes of his pipe against his boot, and the confiding robin flew away with an indignant flutter.

"And about your acting again, Nellie?" he asked.

"That is what we had our—our horrid time about yesterday," she said. "At least, that was at the base of it all. Oh, daddy, he reproached me so, and it cut like a knife! But the darling didn't mean it, I know, now that you have told me what he said afterwards. But, very much against my better judgment, I yielded to him, and I wrote this morning to Louis Grey saying that I could not tell him any date when I should be able to play again. I think it is a mistake, but when Harry is brought down I shall tell him that I have done as he wished. You see, Louis wanted to open again with 'The Winter's Tale' next week. Well, Harry made it so difficult. He said that lying on his back was not very amusing, and that the only thing left him was me. I loved him saying that in a way—at least, I loved that he should feel it. He said that when I began to act again, I should be away all day, which isn't quite true. But there it is——"

Eleanor was silent a moment, and the robin hopped nearer.

"But when I think of the evening after his accident," she went on, "when he utterly turned to me and depended on me, as he did, I feel that nothing in the world ought to weigh against his wish. I only wish that he wished differently. I feel torn in two about it. Nothing, I really assure you, would weigh with me at all if I was sure that I was acting for the best in his regard. But I don't think it is best for him to be accustomed to depend completely on me. The poor darling must still make the best of what is left him, and when I am continually with him he makes little initiative effort. He must begin to think and to feel for himself again. That is why I said I yielded against my better judgment. He said—he said dreadful things yesterday."

Eleanor covered her face with her hands a moment.

"He didn't mean them—oh, I know that!" she said—

"but when you love somebody—well, very much—what he says matters very much, even though it isn't meant. He said he could no doubt console himself in the old ways. Oh, he didn't mean it, but it hurt!"

There was a bright sort of clatter in the drawing-room behind, and Mrs. Ramsden made her appearance with her arms full of hymn-books and Christmas presents.

"Good-morning, Eleanor," she said, "and I am so glad to see you sitting quiet and enjoying the sun. I wish I could bring out another chair, too, and join in your conversation. No, please don't get up. I was only passing through the garden in order to put the hymn-books which we used at choir-practice last night back in the church, and, in order to make one journey serve, I thought I would take the children's presents down to the Parish Room, and hang them on the Christmas-tree. I have not had time yet to say good-morning to Harry, and Alice has fallen off her bicycle and is very much hurt, so she is lying down. Upon my word, we all seem to be tired or hurt to-day, except me. I am so thankful that I am able to do everybody's work, and enjoy it. James, if you could take the hymn-books for me—it will cost you but ten minutes—you would save me twenty in making the double journey between the church and the Parish Room. Will you have a little beef-tea, dear Eleanor, if it is long to wait for lunch? I can call to the kitchen from here, and they will make you some beef-tea, if it would not trouble your maid too much to serve it to you, for Ellen and Jane have their hands full, what with dear Harry wanting his breakfast upstairs and you yours, as I am sure you were quite right to do, if you felt tired. I am so thankful I never feel tired!"

Mr. Ramsden took a pile of hymn-books from his wife, and came near to disloyalty.

"That is your good fortune, my dear," he said, "and not Nellie's fault. We are not all so strong as you."

Eleanor had often recorded in her own mind that her stepmother had a sort of stunning effect on her. She felt stunned now, dazed, as by the contemplation of a loud-roaring, never-ceasing waterfall.

"But do let me help, too," she said.

On went the waterfall, perpetually renewed by the law of gravity.

"I could not think of it, dear Eleanor. You were tired this morning, and so had your breakfast upstairs. I know

you will not mind my mentioning it, but would you—would you, next time you feel you are going to be tired in the morning, tell your maid to bring up your breakfast? You see, Ellen had to cook it separately from ours, which was quite right of her, for you were later than us—indeed, the message did not get to the kitchen till half-past nine—and nothing is nastier than cold eggs and bacon; and then Jane had to bring it up, and when Alice wanted Jane to help her with wrapping up the presents for the old people—why, Jane was nowhere to be found, because she was taking up your breakfast. Yes, James; I think you have got all the hymn-books. Ten, eleven, twelve. That is right. No, there were thirteen. Where is the other one? No, it is my mistake. There were only twelve. So there we are, and if you will kindly put them in the choir-seats, you can come back and sit down and talk to Eleanor till lunch-time. Are you sure you will have no beef-tea, dear Eleanor? It can be made at once. And Mr. Louis Grey comes over from the Wilkins', does he not, to dine with us this evening? And papa will arrive this afternoon, so they will talk Shakespeare together, and I am sure, Eleanor, you will be able to pick up some useful hints. Papa was always a great student of Shakespeare. He read a paper, I remember, to our Literary Society at Hoxton, about Hamlet's madness, which proved he was not mad at all, or if he was, it was Ophelia's fault. It produced a great sensation."

So Mr. Ramsden was borne off by this bright, hard force, and as they receded across the lawn Eleanor heard her stepmother's voice continuing its eager monologue. Then, as the stunning effect which her immediate presence always produced wore off, Eleanor's thoughts went back again to the subject which habitually filled them. It was so much easier, where Harry was concerned, to let kindness take the place of wisdom, so much easier to do what he wanted than, by refusing that, to do what her mind believed was best for him. She was afraid that in this instance she had erred thus, and her conscience was not quite at ease about it. In bodily health he was getting stronger day by day, and day by day that apathy and indolence of brain which had preceded his accident was giving place to a quickness and vividness manifested at present chiefly in peevish irritation. And it was so difficult not to yield to him in any desire that he expressed. So much had been taken from him, that it seemed cruel not to gratify any whim of his. And yet Eleanor knew that it was not by

acting thus that she would help him to make the best of his life. With his natural weakness of character such treatment might but encourage him to degenerate into a mere helpless invalid, and she would almost sooner have had him die than become that. With the possibilities that his brilliant brains contained, she hoped and prayed for a splendid future of achievement. He was in her hands, too, so unreservedly. She felt that if he failed to recapture the best of all that he was capable of, the failure would be hers, that it would be her unwisdom that had hindered instead of helped him. And the danger she was in with regard to him was the danger of letting her love weakly indulge him rather than wisely guide him, and she felt that the note she had sent over to Louis Grey at the Wilkins' was dictated by the spirit of indulgence instead of guidance.

Noon clanged from the church tower, and almost on the stroke of it she heard the wheels of the couch on which he was moved about coming down the passage inside, and she got up to meet and welcome him. In this he half sat, half lay, and it was hoped that as he grew stronger he might assume a more upright position, and be able to control its movements himself. At present he was pushed about by the trained attendant who waited on him.

"Ah, there you are, dear!" she said. "Now, wouldn't you like to be wheeled outside on to the gravel? It is beautifully warm. I have been sitting there for half an hour."

"Alone?" he asked.

"Daddy was with me for a little, and mamma just passed through."

They pushed him out through the drawing-room, and Ellis, his attendant, left them.

"Any news?" asked Harry, looking at the paper that Eleanor still held.

"I really hardly looked. Shall I see if there is anything, and read it to you?"

"No, don't bother. Let's talk. I say, Nellie, I was perfectly fiendish to you all yesterday. I am sorry. And you look tired. Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing, dear. I am a little tired, that's all. As for your being fiendish—oh, Harry, it isn't you! It's nerves, it's something superficial. Also, dear, I expect it's getting better that makes you—well, a little impatient sometimes. And oh, how much better that is than that you should be apathetic!"

He was silent a moment.

"I am better," he said at length, "and I'm going to be ever so much better than this. Nellie, do you know the stir that you sometimes hear going on in a spring day—just a sort of fizz and effervescence of things waking up again after the winter? Little things crack in the bushes, and a bird chirps, and sometimes a bee buzzes. Well, I lay awake a long while last night, and I thought I heard something of the sort going on in my dull, addled brain. I began to phrase sentences, to plan little scenes, to make imaginary conversations."

She drew her chair close up to his.

"Oh, Harry, dear Harry!" she exclaimed.

He looked at her with a certain shy eagerness.

"There was one in particular," he went on, "about you and me. I had behaved very badly, you understand, and I made up a long lovely speech to show that I was sorry. It was really melting, and quite genuine, Nellie. And then suddenly I laughed at myself, because it was pure padding. The play didn't want it. You knew, you see. It was no use in the play."

She laughed.

"No, dear, you were quite right to cut it out. Nobody needed it. Oh, before I forget, Harry! I wrote to Louis this morning, and told him that he mustn't expect me to tell him any certain date for my beginning to act with him again. That's all. Go on about the stir in your brain."

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Louis will be a much-puzzled man this morning, then," he said, "because I also wrote to him, saying that I knew you were eager to begin work again, and asking him whether he was going to open immediately after Christmas. I stirred him up, in fact. However, he's dining here to-night, and we will put things straight!"

"Harry, dear, I would gladly sit by you all day for ever," she said, "if I thought it was good for you. You know that, don't you?"

"It is that amazing fact that I began to have inklings of last night," he said. "But I think, perhaps, it's time I did something more than grumble at you, Nellie."

She smiled.

"You used to say, 'Go away, I'm busy!'—do you remember?—when the work was going well."

"And you used to go, which was a bore. Oh, Nellie, if ever I make anything of my life except a mess, it will be you

who made it, not I! I owe you everything—absolutely everything. And the debt is no burden. I love it. And I shall keep on running into debt with you. I shall be cross, and tiresome, and impatient, a million times. But will you try to remember I am trying to do better?"

She kissed him.

"That's all," she said.

THE END

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